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6 Gaslighting Phrases People Say To Manipulate You

Kelsey Borresen·Senior Reporter, HuffPost Life, Tue, April 27, 2021

[note: this applies to gaslighting survivors of childhood abuse, too]

Think you might be dealing with a gaslighter? Watch out for these relationship red flags.

Gaslighting, a manipulation tactic often wielded by emotional abusers, gradually makes you question your own judgment, feelings, memories and reality. Because of its insidious nature, it can be hard for victims to recognize it as it's happening.

Abusers use gaslighting as a way to gain and maintain power and control in the relationship. They break down your confidence over time by making you think your interpretation of events is incorrect. The more you second-guess yourself, the more you start to believe their version must be the accurate one.

"People who cannot authentically argue their point of view or stand behind their words turn to gaslighting as a tool," therapist Shannon Thomas, author of "Healing From Hidden Abuse," told HuffPost. "They resort to confusion-creating tactics, and that is a sign of character weakness."

The term comes from the 1938 play "Gaslight" by Patrick Hamilton (later adapted into two films in the 1940s), in which a husband tries to convince his wife she's losing her mind to distract her from his criminal behavior.

Once an abusive partner has broken down the victim's ability to trust their own perceptions, the victim is more likely to put up with the abusive behavior and stay in the relationship.
Beverly Engel, psychotherapist and author

Gaslighting is also a way for the abusive partner to avoid taking responsibility for their bad behavior, said psychotherapist Beverly Engel, author of "The Emotionally Abusive Relationship."

"For example, accusing you of flirting or being unfaithful may be a smoke-screen for the fact that he is doing those things," she said. Your partner might say, "I can't stand the way you flirt with other men whenever we go to a party," when really, they're the one being disloyal.

Below, therapists reveal some of the common phrases gaslighters use so you can be more adept at recognizing this behavior.

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1. “That never happened.”

Gaslighters will do or say something abusive and then deny it ever happened to sow seeds of self-doubt in the victim, said licensed clinical social worker Lisa Ferentz, who specializes in treating trauma.

“The victim starts questioning her instincts and relies more and more on the ‘reality’ that gets created and manipulated by the abuser,” she said. “It also heightens a sense of dependency on the abuser.”

2. “You’re too sensitive.”

If you try to express your hurt or disappointment over something the abusive person said — perhaps a cruel remark they made about your appearance in front of your friends that they insist everyone knew was just a funny “joke” — they’ll minimize your feelings by telling you you’re overly sensitive or making a big deal out of nothing. The intent is to make you feel stupid for even trying to stand up for yourself.

“Once an abusive partner has broken down the victim’s ability to trust their own perceptions, the victim is more likely to put up with the abusive behavior and stay in the relationship,” Engel said.

3. “You’re crazy — and other people think so, too.”

Over time, a gaslighter’s lies and distortions of reality make the victim legitimately question their own sanity. The abusive person uses this to their advantage.

“Once their confidence has been shaken, the gaslighter ‘confirms’ the victim’s worst fear: They really must be crazy,” Ferentz said.

An abuser may also try to convince your friends and family that you’re mentally unstable in order to discredit you and create distance between you and your loved ones.

“Gaslighters also deliberately spread that propaganda to the victim’s friends and family in an attempt to further isolate them and get others to align with the abuser,” Ferentz said. “This decreases the likelihood that the victim’s stories will be believed and disconnects them from the resources that would make it possible for them to leave.”

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4. “You have a terrible memory.”

“We all have moments with a lapse of recalling details of a particular conversation,” Thomas said. “That’s normal. However, a gaslighter will focus on making the victim doubt their memory about a multitude of situations. They do this because getting a victim to question themselves is at the core of gaslighting. When a victim no longer trusts their assessments, the abuser is in complete control.”

5. “I’m sorry you think that I hurt you.”

On its face, this might appear to be an apology, but it’s not. Rather, it’s a way for the abuser to deflect responsibility for any pain they’ve caused and instead blame you for misinterpreting the situation, said clinical psychologist B. Nilaja Green.

“This can result in one partner distrusting their own judgment and their own reactions,” she said. “They may really begin to believe that they are ‘too sensitive,’ or ‘irrational,’ which can lead to them relying on the other person’s interpretation of events as more accurate or reasonable.”

6. “You should have known how I would react.”

This is another case of the gaslighter trying to shift responsibility off of themselves and onto the victim. Instead of being accountable for their own behavior, they’ll pin it on you.

“Gaslighting involves twisting facts so they can avoid personal ownership of their behaviors,” Thomas said. “By telling the victim they should have known better, the gaslighter places the blame on the victim for not only speaking up but also the abuser’s response.”

What To Do If Someone Is Gaslighting You

Depending how long you’ve been trapped in this toxic dynamic, it may be “excruciatingly difficult” to pull yourself out, psychoanalyst Robin Stern previously wrote for Vice. That said, it is possible.

“The antidote to gaslighting is becoming more self-aware,” Engel said. “The better you know yourself, the better you will be at fending off inaccurate statements about yourself.”

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Keep paying attention to your gut.

Gaslighting erodes your confidence to the point that you no longer trust your instincts about a situation. But try to stay in touch with whatever you're feeling; those emotional signals offer important clues that you don't want to ignore.

"When you feel that tension in the pit of your stomach, or a sense of unease with a situation, don't immediately dismiss that feeling because someone else thinks you should," Green said. "Investigate what this sensation could be telling you and get more information before making your next move."

Hold on to texts and emails.

That way you have a tangible record of their behavior, which "is helpful when combating the confusion created by a gaslighter," Thomas said.

You can also write down notes from your conversations to help you separate fact from fiction. "Where is the conversation veering off from reality into the other person's view?" Stern wrote. "Then after you look at the dialogue, write down how you felt. Look for signs of repeated denial of your experience."

Consider calling out their behavior.

"Let the other person know you see the manipulation game," Thomas said. For example, if your partner accuses you of being overly sensitive, you can say, "No, I'm not too sensitive. I'm reacting the way anyone would to the way you treat me or the way you act," Engel suggested. Or, "No, I'm not too sensitive, the problem is you are not sensitive enough."

But know that even in doing so, their behavior isn't likely to change.

Just because you call them out doesn't mean they're going to validate your point of view or suddenly see the error in their ways. For this reason, Ferentz said she doesn't recommend trying to reason with a gaslighter.

"[They] typically have no intention of changing, so waiting for them to take ownership, genuinely apologize and change their ways will probably only lead to more abuse and make it less likely that the victim will be able to leave," she said.

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Check in with a trusted friend, family member or a therapist.

Ask a close friend or relative how they would feel if their partner treated or spoke to them the way yours does. See if they've noticed you behaving differently since you've been with this person.

"Do you seem to shrink around them, agree with everything that they say, even things that are not in line with your values?" Green said. "Do you really not seem like yourself?"

Many victims are apprehensive to tell their loved ones about problems in the relationship because they worry it would be disloyal to their partner, Engel said. But it's important — imperative, even — to speak up.

"In this situation, it may be the only way you can maintain your sanity," she said.

Also, consider reaching out to a mental health professional who specializes in emotional abuse (or ask a loved one to help you find one) for additional support and to help you forge a path forward.

Need help? In the U.S., call 1-866-331-9474 or text "loveis" to 22522 for the National Dating Abuse Helpline.