

8 Ways Gaslighters Manipulate and Control Relationships

How gaslighters traumatize and exploit victims to achieve their goals.

“Some people try to be tall by cutting off the heads of others.” —Paramahansa Yogananda

“When someone constantly puts you down, leaves you feeling like you can't do anything right, or makes you feel worthless and bad about yourself in general... it's emotional abuse.” —Source Unknown

Gaslighting can be defined as a combination of brainwashing, psychological bullying, and emotional abuse for the purpose of domination and control. The term gaslighting originated from the 1944 film Gaslight, in which a husband systematically tormented his wife by convincing her that she's insane, thereby robbing her objectivity and self-worth.

In our contemporary society where disinformation, “alternative facts,” divisiveness, and narcissism are prevalent, gaslighting is often utilized in business, politics, media, at the workplace, and in personal relationships. Examples of gaslighting include companies that advertise addictive products to children, politicians who scapegoat entire groups to divide the community, media talking heads who espouse hate to gain notoriety, executives who exploit employees for profitability, and relational abusers who blame their victims for victimization. Gaslighting is psychological violence.

Various research and authors have studied the effects of gaslighting and its destructive consequences. Below are eight common manipulative and controlling tactics of gaslighters, with references from the book *How to Successfully Handle Gaslighters and Stop Psychological Bullying*.

1. Chronic Lying

"If you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes accepted as the truth."

Perhaps the most common and strident trait of gaslighting is the invention of a false narrative by the gaslighter, which they utilize to brainwash, attack, belittle, discredit, and/or disempower their victim(s). Rather than basing assertions on facts, evidence, objectivity, and proof, the gaslighter's accusations are often blatant lies or gross exaggerations. The gaslighter utilizes this tactic in order to stay on the offensive, seize the conversation, and dictate the relationship.

In addition, by keeping on the attack and being highly aggressive, the gaslighter takes the focus off of his or her significant weaknesses, flaws, and inadequacies, which the gaslighter is deeply afraid of exposing. Through constant lying and exaggerations, the gaslighter keeps his victims on the defensive and maintains social and psychological leverage.

"My wife is a pathetic loser, and she needs to know the truth." —Anonymous husband

"The work your department does is a waste of time and resources. How do you even justify your employment?" —Anonymous manager
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"Who gives a s--t about their rights!? They're not people!" —Anonymous, disparaging other demographic groups

2. Normalize Falsehoods and Induce "Insecure Complex"

Like psychological warfare, gaslighting falsehoods are repeated constantly in order to overwhelm the relationship. In many cases, the gaslighter induces an "insecure complex" in the minds of their victims, who become beset with confusion, anxiety, shame, and inferiority over their own identity and self-worth. Until the gaslightee breaks free psychologically, she or he may lose the ability to affirm oneself, at least in relation to the gaslighter's repeated browbeating and brainwashing.

"When I was in school, I was bullied because of my gender, ethnicity, and physical appearance. I internalized a lot of it and was ashamed of myself. It took a long time before I realized that I wasn't the problem... Now I'm reclaiming my power." —Anonymous

3. Debilitate the Victim and Suppress Dissent

As the gaslighter continuously instigates put-downs and marginalization towards targeted individuals or groups, some victims may suffer “gaslightee fatigue,” where they are so worn out by the gaslighter’s constant attacks and coercion, and so tired or afraid of defending themselves, that they “freeze” psychologically and tolerate abuse with numbness and resignation. In this way, the gaslighter gets away with suppressing dissent and extorting the relationship.

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“My mother was always possessive and super critical of my dates...they were never good enough. She was so nasty towards them I gave up dating until I graduated and moved out.” — Anonymous

4. Aggressive and Hostile When Confronted

Since one of the key tactics of gaslighting is to stay on the offensive, many gaslighters can become highly aggressive and hostile when called on their falsehoods and lies. Rather than justifying their own words and actions (which they know are indefensible), they try to regain control by doubling or tripling down on their attacks, while discrediting and dehumanizing their victims. By enacting this “toxic drama,” the gaslighter hopes to intimidate and bully their victims into submission while getting away with their own character flaws and moral corruption.

“When I caught my boyfriend sexting with someone, he flatly said it didn’t happen—that I imagined the whole thing. He called me a crazy b----.” —Anonymous

5. Isolate and Divide

Some gaslighters artificially manufacture a “siege” mentality, and strategically isolate the gaslightee(s) from certain people, resource, information, support, and rights. Depending on the situation, a gaslighter may coerce the gaslightee to limit their interaction with friends, family, associates, wider community, or broader media.

By deploying demagoguery tactics such as “us versus them,” “divide and conquer,” “isolate and control,” “enemies are everywhere,” and “I’m your only hope,” the gaslighter places the gaslightee in a psychological straight jacket, and further establishes an authoritarian relationship.

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“Soon after our marriage, my husband wanted to limit my contacts with friends and family. He told me he was the only one I could trust, and everyone else was lying.” —Anonymous

6. Perpetuate the Fake “Savior,” Fake “Superiority” Myths

Typical of oppressor psychology, some gaslighters cast themselves as “savior,” “hero,” “superior,” and the only one with the power and solution to alleviate the gaslightee’s many issues and difficulties (real or invented). In order to grant relief, claims the gaslighter, the gaslightee must submit to their directives, no matter how manipulative and exploitative.

With this tactic, the gaslighter further reinforces the codependent, subjugating relationship. Gaslighters desperately need others’ subservience in order to “feed” their sense of toxic supremacy and distorted self-importance (narcissistic supply). Without acting “superior” toward their victims, many gaslighters feel like nobodies.

“My ex-partner used to say that if we divorced, no one else would love me, because I was so undesirable.” —Anonymous

“You don’t like the way I talk? Well, who else is going to hire you?” —Foreman to temporary workers

7. Offer False Promises

As part of the lying and exaggeration, some gaslighters will occasionally dangle false hope in front of their victims—promising to reduce the harsh treatment or hinting that things will eventually get better. But beware! Such promises are often just another deceptive tactic to give the victims unreal hope and to let their guards down while tolerating more abuse.

As an example, someone who promises to “reduce” the number of assaults on his victim is still an attacker/abuser, and the recipient, even one who is grateful for the “reduced” harshness, is still a victim. Many gaslighters continue their ill-treatment of others until concerted and determined intervention takes place to halt their highly destructive ways.

8. Social Domination and Psychological Control

For pathological gaslighters, the ultimate purpose of gaslighting is about power and control. By aggressively weaponizing false information, and repeatedly bombarding their victims with propaganda and disempowering messages, the gaslighter aims to psychologically subjugate

and subdue an individual, a group, or an entire society. The gaslighter can then exploit their victims at will, for the purpose of social domination and personal gain.