

Gaslighting in Intimate Relationships: A Form of Coercive Control That You Need to Know More About

Gaslighting is abusive behaviour used to coercively control and gain power over another individual. Like other forms of coercive control, gaslighting harms those who experience it.

This resource describes gaslighting and what it can look like in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV), examines potential impacts on survivors, and offers strategies for survivors experiencing gaslighting.

What is gaslighting and what does it look like?

Gaslighting occurs in intimate relationships when a partner repeatedly undermines and distorts their partner's reality by denying facts, the situation around them, or their partner's feelings and needs. It can cause a survivor to question themselves and become unable to trust their own perceptions and judgements. This gains the partner control and power over the survivor whose self-doubt and erosion of confidence leads to increased dependence on the partner who is behaving abusively. An additional benefit for the partner using gaslighting is that the survivor is more likely to stay in the abusive relationship.

Gaslighting is a coercive control tactic that shifts the focus of concern from the partner's abusive behaviour to the supposed emotional and psychological instability of the survivor.

A Note on Coercive Control

Control in and of itself is not abusive. We all seek and benefit from healthy expressions of control over our own lives to increase our agency.

However, coercive control differs from healthy expressions of control as it is the entrapment of another by gaining control over their behaviour and choices through force and/or threats of force and manipulation.

Coercive control is an abusive tactic used because the person using it gains a benefit that comes at the expense of another's agency, safety, and wellbeing.

Gaslighting doesn't just take place in intimate relationships. This coercive control tactic can be used in any ongoing relationship to gain power over another (e.g. between friends or colleagues). It can also be used to magnify and exploit power imbalances in relationships such as:

- Superior & employee
- Teacher & student
- Parent & child
- Caregiver & person needing care

What those experiencing gaslighting may be told

Gaslighting starts off slowly in a relationship and may not initially “look” like abuse, though it often co-occurs with other forms of IPV. Survivors may be told things like:

“You’re overreacting – that never happened!”

“Can you hear? That’s not what I said!”

“It’s all in your head!”

“You need serious help.”

“We moved to Canada for you. How could you say I treat you badly?”

“You already took your estrogen!”

“I was just joking. Lighten up.”

“Calm down, I didn’t do anything!”

“I swear I did! I translated those documents for you and sent them in!”

“What are you talking about? There’s no such thing as violence in queer relationships – I love you!”

“You said you would pick up the kids – how could you forget? What an awful mom!”

“The wheelchair was broken when you got it. I didn’t do anything!”

How to recognize gaslighting

Gaslighting is an insidious form of abuse. That means the partner’s use of gaslighting is likely to gradually increase in frequency and/or intensity at the same time that the survivor’s confidence in their own perceptions is decreasing as a result of the gaslighting. This makes it difficult to recognize the behaviours. However, there are some signs that may indicate when a survivor is being gaslit in a relationship. The survivor’s partner may frequently:

Trivialize – Minimize and dismiss their feelings or tell them that they are overreacting to a situation.

Lie – Lie about or deny something and refuse to admit the lie even when proof is shown.

Distort reality – Be adamant that they did or said something even when they did not.

Change the narrative – Blame them for something that wasn’t their fault and make them feel like they have to apologize.

Cynthia's Experience of Being Gaslighted by her Partner

When Cynthia first met Jason, she was completely smitten by his kindness. However, as their relationship continued over the next several months, Cynthia began to feel that something was “off” but couldn't quite place her finger on what was causing her discomfort. Jason began to flirt with other women, sometimes in front of Cynthia. When Cynthia would call him out on it, Jason would always tell her she was “losing it” and “acting insane.” Jason would present gifts to Cynthia and say that he spent his money on her even though it was Cynthia's own money that he had used to pay for the gift. Eventually, Cynthia began to feel that she needed help with her memory and self-esteem and “jealousy” issues, as characterized by Jason.

What gaslighting behaviours was Jason engaging in? How were these behaviours affecting Cynthia?

Impacts of gaslighting on survivors

Gaslighting can affect someone's mental, psychological, financial, and physical wellbeing. Gaslighting may cause survivors to:

- Feel confused and disoriented
- Lose confidence in themselves
- Stay in abusive relationships for longer since they feel they can no longer trust their own memories and need their partner to help them better understand reality and make decisions
- Constantly doubt themselves and think they are too “paranoid”, “sensitive”, or other terms they have been called by their partner
- Experience anxiety and depression
- Lose their sense of self-agency and freedom
- Become isolated from friends and family

Gaslighting can also impact survivors in different ways, particularly due to their social location. Survivors who face multiple systems of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, heteronormativity, ableism) are more likely to have experiences of gaslighting and abuse compounded. For instance, experiences of gaslighting may be intensified when systemic oppressions embedded in the very institutions (e.g. justice system, healthcare) survivors seek help from increase the possibility of their experiences being minimized or not believed. This happens when women are presumed to be “irrational” or “emotional”, or through ableist beliefs such as “women with physical disabilities are asexual and would not be targets of sexual assault” which can cause reports of sexual assault to not be believed.¹ In fact, some researchers argue that gaslighting works so well because systems of oppression create power imbalances that render some people more marginalized in society.²

Impacts on Children

Direct and indirect experiences of IPV and coercive control, such as gaslighting, are also harmful to the wellbeing of children. It can have negative impacts on academic performance, social relationships, behaviours, and self-esteem. Children may feel like they need to be “record keepers” for their parent who is being gaslit and to assist them with recalling details of an incident to help their parent make sense of the situation.

Strategies for survivors experiencing gaslighting

1. Know that a partner who repeatedly trivializes, lies, distorts reality, or changes the narrative may be using gaslighting to coercively control you.
2. Share your concerns with others who you trust and feel safe with, and who will validate your experiences and feelings.
3. Engage with activities and interests that you enjoy which can provide emotional safety and space from the situation.
4. Pay attention to your partner’s actions, and not just their words. Their behaviours may not match their promises to not cause harm.
5. Record everything as best as you can. Keep documents, photos, and communication records (e.g. text messages, emails) in a safe place. Write down events in a journal or keep voice memos (if your phone is safe with you) so you can go back to replay an event.
6. Connect with trusted friends and family, if it is safe to do so, for a ‘check-in’ about an incident to hear an objective point of view. At the same time, know that family and friends are most likely to hear your partner’s denials or claims that you are “losing it” or “mixed up again” and may not be privy to the actual incident or facts.
7. Know that a partner who is gaslighting you aims to make you and others believe you are the problem. They want their abusive behaviour to remain hidden.
8. Reach out to a local domestic violence shelter or program for support. You do not have to move into a shelter to benefit from their services and supports. Visit <https://sheltersafe.ca/> to find and contact a shelter near you, or you can call a helpline at 1-866-863-0511 or TTY 1-866-863-7868).
9. Know that gaslighting may mask or detract your awareness from the danger of and escalation in the abuse that you are experiencing.
10. Make a safety plan with a trusted friend, family member, or shelter worker that includes how and where you will escape quickly.
11. Remember that it is not your fault that you are being gaslighted. It is a form of abuse. It is about your partner’s desire for unhealthy control and power over you that allows them to manipulate you.

Related Resources:

“There’s a way out”: Insights from Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

This resource amplifies the voices of survivors of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) by sharing their advice to those who are experiencing IPV.

Coercive Control and Family Law

This issue of Family Violence & Family Law Briefs provides a primer on coercive control for legal, social service, and healthcare professionals who are supporting survivors of family violence in the family court system.

¹ Sweet, P. (2019). The Sociology of Gaslighting. *American Sociological Review*, (84)5, pp. 855.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419874843>

² Sweet, P. (2019). The Sociology of Gaslighting. *American Sociological Review*, (84)5, 851-875.

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