

Gaslighting

What is gaslighting?

Most commonly, it takes the form of frequently disagreeing with someone or refusing to listen to their point of view. Many of us might be guilty of some mild form of gaslighting from time to time – refusing to hear what our partner has to say even if they're in the right or persistently disagreeing over some minor quibble, even when you aren't sure of your position. It's mostly harmless, a form of pettiness – an unwillingness to be proven wrong.

But, in more extreme cases it can be a real form of abuse. When it's done repeatedly, over a long period of time, it can have the effect of making someone doubt their own ideas about things – or even question their sanity. It can have a highly negative effect on a person's self-esteem and confidence. In certain situations, someone might deliberately gaslight their partner as a way of controlling them – a serious form of emotional abuse that is never acceptable.

Why is gaslighting dangerous?

Gaslighting is dangerous because it undermines a person's sense of self-belief. If you tell someone they're wrong about things over and over, it can make them feel insecure or less confident in their point of view. Eventually, they may come to agree with the person who is attacking them – believing that they must be right.

This can be true of small annoyances ('I always do the washing up. Why don't you do it?' 'You never do the laundry') but it can be even more damaging when it's related to things with an emotional context. This might include questioning your memory of events ('Are you sure it was like that? I don't think it was') or trying to convince you that your emotional reaction to something is inappropriate or disproportionate ('You're acting crazy').

Why does gaslighting happen?

Sometimes, the person doing the gaslighting doesn't know they're doing it. Sometimes, it's as much to do with their own insecurities around being wrong or having less power in a relationship as it is out of an active desire to undermine their partner.

These insecurities might come out of experiences in childhood or in previous relationships. Or they might just be the kinds of insecurities that lots of us struggle to deal with – after all, it can be difficult to admit when you're wrong.

In other cases, this can be a deliberate tactic used to make their partner feel less confident and less likely to challenge them. Again, this is a totally unacceptable thing to do and a highly abusive pattern of behaviour.

How do you address gaslighting?

If you feel like the way your partner engages with you is – intentionally or not – is a form of gaslighting, it's important to do something about it. It can be easy to slip this kind of interaction to becoming habit – with the consequence over time being significant damage to both your mental wellbeing and your relationship.

The first thing to do is to try to see the situation from the outside. This will have two effects: firstly, it will allow you to see more clearly whether what you are experiencing is a form of a gaslighting, and secondly, it will allow you to see your partner's behaviour in a less emotional way.

Take a step back from the situation and assess it: do you think that this is what's happening? It might be useful to talk to family and friends – people who you trust who can give you an objective opinion on things. It can be a good idea to talk to more than one person: that way you can get a few different perspectives.

And then, try to understand is what they're doing out of a desire to control you, or because they struggle with the idea of not being in control themselves. Taking a more analytical approach to our partner's behaviour can help us to understand that it isn't always designed to hurt us, even if it does. If you do feel they're doing this intentionally, it's important to understand that this is not ok. Although it may sound dramatic, you may like to speak to [The National Domestic Violence helpline](https://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk/). Their support workers can help you understand what you're going through and talk you through potential ways to address it.

How to talk about gaslighting

What's most important is that you and your partner find a new way of communicating. Although it can be difficult, it's important to address this issue directly. Your partner will need to know how their behaviour is making you feel. Obviously, if you've got into a pattern of them dismissing your feelings, it isn't always easy to get through. But they will need to understand the effects of what they're doing before anything is going to change.

Find a time to talk when you're both already in a good mood. Don't try to bring things up in the middle of an argument, as anything you say then could be perceived as an attack. You might like to give a little forewarning of the conversation, letting your partner know that you'd like to talk about something that's been on your mind later.

Then, it will be a case of trying to negotiate around the topic of what's happening, listen to them too – let them know that you want to understand where they're coming from, and that you want to make your relationship together work.

Support Networks and useful websites:

<https://www.relate.org.uk/get-help/five-communication-hacks-happy-relationship>

<http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk/>

