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Gaslighting and Mental Health: A Psychological Perspective on Emotional Abuse

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ABSTRACT

A type of psychological abuse known as "gaslighting" occurs when a person makes another person doubt their recollections, mental health, or sense of reality. Gaslighting victims may feel bewildered and unwilling to trust themselves. Gaslighting is a destructive psychological manipulation tactic designed to erode a person's sense of reality and self-worth. Understanding its mechanisms and signs is crucial for protecting oneself and others from its damaging effects. Psychological research continues to explore gaslighting's impact and the best methods for intervention and recovery. It involves denying or distorting reality and can be incredibly damaging to a person's mental health and well-being. Asking for assistance is a proactive first step toward regaining control, bolstering resilience, and improving general mental and emotional wellbeing if you are having trouble handling the consequences of gaslighting on your own.

Keywords: Psychological Abuse, Gaslighting, Mental Health, sense of reality, Well-Being.

Introduction: As students, all of us must have experienced at some point in our lives that during the early days of student life, we used to ask our doubts to teachers very comfortably, and the teachers too would answer those doubts with ease. But as the student grows older, the concepts become more difficult, and it becomes harder to handle the syllabus. However, it is common for students to still have doubts in their minds. In such situations, a student starts looking at certain subjects or concepts from a different perspective-beyond bookish knowledge, drawing from their life experiences and understanding. To get answers to the questions that arise in their mind, the student seeks guidance from teachers.

In this scenario, some teachers do answer the students' questions, but many begin to avoid such questions. Sometimes, in other situations, the student may even hear things like, "Do you think you know more? Were the scientists who made those discoveries fools? Do you think you know better than them? You

think too much. Are you asking questions just to disturb the class? What kind of illogical doubts are these? Don't disturb the class." After receiving such responses from the teacher, the class may laugh for a while, and then you quietly sit down. Then the next time you try to ask a doubt- whether in the same teacher's class or another's-you start to self-doubt. You wonder, "Am I asking the right question? Is my question illogical? What if the teacher scolds me again? Does my question even have any basis? Maybe it's better if I just stay quiet in class." "Am I stupid? Am I dumb?"

Such thoughts begin to surface, undermining your confidence and self-esteem. As a result, the student starts to believe that the other person is correct and that they themselves know nothing. They wonder, "What should I do? Should I ask my question or not? Maybe I should just drop it and deal with it later." This phenomenon is known as gaslighting. "The teacher may have acted either intentionally or unintentionally, as gaslighting often occurs without deliberate intent. Regardless, the impact remains. In today's world, gaslighting has become increasingly prevalent; misinformation can be easily disseminated among the general public."

Gaslighting, whether intentional or not, can lead individuals to question their own perceptions and memories. Unintentional gaslighting often arises from dismissive language or minimizing someone's feelings, which, over time, can erode self-confidence and trust.

In our digital age, the rapid spread of misinformation through social media and other platforms has amplified the occurrence of gaslighting. False narratives can quickly gain traction, making it challenging for individuals to discern truth from deception.

Origin: Gaslighting is a covert form of psychological manipulation in which an individual or group causes another person to question their perception of reality, memory, or judgment. The term "gaslighting" comes from the title of the 1938 play *Gas Light* by British playwright Patrick Hamilton, which was later adapted into films in 1940 and most famously in 1944. The term evolved from this to describe any situation where someone is manipulated into doubting their perceptions, memories, or sanity- often through persistent denial, lying, and contradiction. In the story, a husband manipulates his wife into questioning her reality and sanity by doing small things to undermine her perception - for example, dimming the gas lights in their home and then denying that the lights have changed when she notices it. Over time, his constant lies, and psychological manipulation make her doubt her own mind.

1930	Novel by Bruce Hamilton
1938	Play titled Gaslight by Patrick Hamilton
1940	Gaslight movie
1944	Gaslight movie

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines gaslighting as "psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator."

Common Contexts of Gaslighting

Personal Relationships: Often used by abusive partners to maintain control and power. Gaslighting is especially common in close, personal relationships—romantic partners, family members, or close friends. Here, it can be used as a form of emotional manipulation and control.

Examples:

Romantic Partners: One partner may deny events or conversations, dismiss concerns as "crazy," or insist something didn't happen the way the other remembers. For example, if someone brings up a hurtful comment, the gaslighter might say, *"You're too sensitive-that's not what I said,"* or *"You're imagining things."*

Family Dynamics: A parent might downplay or deny abusive behavior from the past, saying things like, *"That never happened,"* or *"You've always been dramatic."* This causes the child (even in adulthood) to question their own memories and feelings. Parents or relatives may gaslight children or other family members to enforce control.

Friendships: A friend might subtly manipulate another by constantly invalidating their feelings or rewriting shared experiences to make the other seem irrational or overly emotional.

Impact: Over time, gaslighting in personal relationships can erode self-esteem, cause anxiety or depression, and make the victim overly dependent on the gaslighter for validation and reality-checking.

Workplace: Manipulative managers or coworkers may use gaslighting to undermine colleagues. Gaslighting can also occur in professional settings, where power dynamics and competition often play a role. In the workplace, it's typically used to undermine, control, or discredit a colleague, employee, or even a supervisor.

Examples:

Undermining Performance: A manager might consistently dismiss an employee's contributions, claim work wasn't completed when it was, or say, *"I never told you to do that,"* despite giving clear instructions earlier.

Blame Shifting: A coworker might make a mistake and then convince others that it was your fault. They may manipulate situations to make you seem forgetful or incompetent, causing you to doubt your own capabilities.

Withholding Information: Purposefully not sharing critical updates or resources, then blaming you for not knowing or failing to perform.

Rewriting History: A supervisor might change details of past conversations or decisions and insist they always say something different-especially when trying to avoid accountability.

Impact: Workplace gaslighting can lead to confusion, self-doubt, reduced job performance, burnout, and even mental health issues like anxiety and depression. It can create a toxic environment and push talented individuals out of roles or companies.

Institutional Gaslighting: Organizations or authorities may use it to dismiss complaints or avoid accountability. Institutional gaslighting occurs when organizations—such as schools, corporations, governments, religious groups, or other systems—dismiss or deny the lived experiences of individuals or groups, often to protect themselves or maintain power. This type of gaslighting is often systematic and deeply rooted in policies or culture.

Examples:

Workplace Institutions: When an employee reports discrimination, harassment, or unethical practices, the company might deny wrongdoing, minimize the complaint, or accuse the person of being too sensitive or misinterpreting events. This protects the organization but discredits the individual.

Educational Institutions: A school might dismiss a student's complaint about bullying, racism, or sexual harassment, insisting *"We've never had a problem like that before,"* or *"Are you sure it wasn't just a misunderstanding?"* This invalidates the student's experience and deters future reporting.

Healthcare Institutions: Patients, especially women or minorities, might be told that their symptoms are "all in their head" or due to stress, rather than being taken seriously. This can delay proper diagnosis and treatment.

Government or Legal Systems: When marginalized communities raise concerns about systemic injustice—such as police violence, discrimination, or lack of access to services—the government may respond by downplaying the issue or labeling critics as "unpatriotic" or "misinformed."

Impact:

Institutional gaslighting can silence voices, perpetuate systemic harm, and make individuals feel powerless or invisible. It also erodes public trust and discourages people from seeking help or advocating for change.

Gaslighting is a destructive psychological manipulation tactic designed to erode a person's sense of reality and self-worth. Understanding its mechanisms and signs is crucial for protecting oneself and others from its damaging effects. Psychological research continues to explore gaslighting's impact and the best methods for intervention and recovery.

Examples of gaslighting

1. Questioning someone's memory
2. Refusing to take responsibility for your actions
3. Refusing to listen to someone or faking confusion to make someone doubt themselves

4. Changing the focus of a discussion by questioning someone's credibility
5. Undermining or ignoring someone's feelings
6. Using negative stereotypes against someone.

Signs of Being Gaslit: Gaslighting can be so subtle that people often don't realize it's happening until they're deeply affected. Frequent self-doubt, excessive apology, feeling that something is "wrong" but being unable to articulate it clearly, and feeling extremely anxious or powerless in some relationships, causing the person to become isolated from support systems.

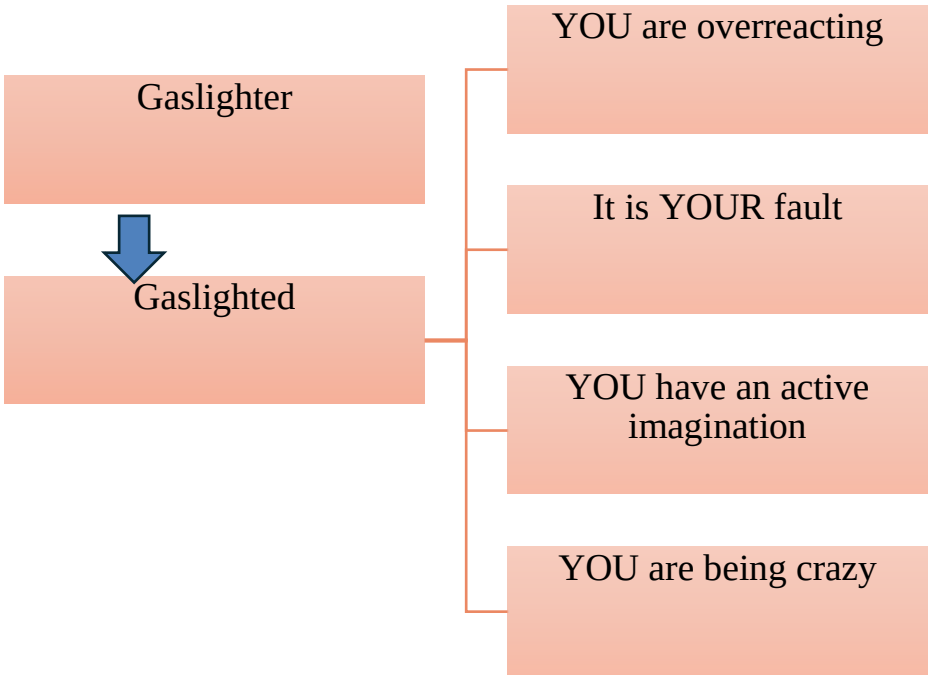


Figure: Signs of Being Gaslit

Over time, gaslighting can lead to severe emotional and mental distress. Victims may begin to doubt their own memories and perceptions, experience confusion, anxiety, and self-doubt, feel isolated and unable to trust themselves or others, and may develop symptoms of depression or, in severe cases, trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

What is Double Whammy (DW)

Double Whammy (DW) as a specific pattern within gaslighting, using everyday life and psychiatric examples to show how it works. In DW gaslighting, projective identification is at work. The gaslighter projects their own negative qualities (e.g., being controlling, irrational, aggressive) onto the victim and then provokes the victim into behaving in a way that "proves" the projection – only to shame or discredit them for it.

Step 1: Verbal Attack or Emotional Provocation

The gaslighter provokes or attacks the victim – could be criticism, blame, sarcasm, etc.

Step 2: Gaslighting Intervention

When the victim responds (with anger, confusion, hurt, etc.), the gaslighter often invalidates their response by questioning their mental state, memory, or emotional stability.

This creates a "double bind"—the victim is hurt but also made to feel they're irrational or mentally unstable for being hurt. In gaslighting, one person attempts to make another person doubt his or her own judgments and perceptions by projective identification.

An example of the impact of gaslighting on mental health

Psychiatric Example (Scenario: Patient-Therapist or Family-Patient)

Attack: A parent says to their adult child (who has a history of mental health treatment), "You always act like you're crazy. No wonder nobody wants to be around you."

Response: The adult child yells in frustration, "I'm not crazy! Stop treating me like I'm broken!"

Gaslighting Intervention: The parent calmly responds, "You're yelling again. Do you think a normal person behaves like this? Maybe you need to go back on medication."

Result: The adult child now questions their emotional regulation and sanity – even though their reaction was a natural response to an attack.

Everyday Life Example (Scenario: A partner relationship)

Attack: A husband tells his wife, "You're useless at housework. I always have to do everything."

Victim's response: She gets upset and says, "That's not true. I do a lot. It really hurts."

Gaslighting intervention: He responds, "Wow. You're so sensitive. That's why I can't talk to you about anything — you always twist things."

Result: She begins to doubt whether her reaction was valid or whether she's simply "too sensitive," as he says.

Why It's So Damaging

Self-doubt: Victims begin to distrust their own emotional responses and perception of reality.

Emotional isolation: They feel they can't share their side without being labeled unstable.

Gaslighter gains power: The victim becomes more dependent, less confident, and easier to control.

Mechanisms of Gaslighting: The means or mechanisms of gaslighting refer to the specific methods or tactics used by a person (often a manipulator or abuser) to make someone question their perception, memory, or sanity. Here are the main mechanisms of gaslighting,

Denial: The manipulator denies facts or events that the victim knows to be true. The gaslighter denies things they've said or done or tells the victim that they're imagining things. The gaslighter flatly denies things that have clearly happened or statements they've made. Even in the face of evidence, they will insist that the event or conversation never occurred. This creates confusion and forces the victim to question their own memory and perception. For example, when confronted, a gaslighter might say, *"I never said that — you must be imagining things."*

Misdirection: Changing the subject or diverting attention from the manipulative person's behavior. Misdirection is a core technique in which the gaslighter intentionally diverts attention from the issue to avoid accountability and create confusion. Instead of directly addressing a concern, the gaslighter diverts attention with unrelated topics, exaggerated counteraccusations, or alternative distractions. This prevents the victim from resolving their concerns and confuses them.



Figure: Types of Gaslighting Mechanisms

Trivializing: Minimizing the victim's feelings and suggesting they are overreacting. Common phrases used by a gaslighter when trivializing include: "You're too sensitive." "You're making a big deal out of nothing." "Why are you so dramatic?" "You're imagining problems that don't exist." By repeatedly belittling the victim's emotional responses, the gaslighter gradually teaches the victim to suppress their feelings and question whether their reactions are reasonable. Over time, this can lead to the victim doubting their own emotional reality, feeling isolated, and becoming increasingly dependent on the gaslighter's version of events. Trivializing involves minimizing or dismissing the victim's feelings, thoughts, or experiences, often suggesting that they are overreacting or being irrational. This tactic sends the message that the victim's emotions are invalid or exaggerated.

Withholding: This is done deliberately to frustrate, confuse, and silence the victim. Refusing to engage or acknowledge concerns, leaving the victim feeling dismissed. Withholding involves the gaslighter refusing to engage in meaningful conversation or pretending not to understand the victim's concerns. Instead of addressing what's being said, the gaslighter might respond with: "I don't know what you're talking about." "You're just trying to confuse me." "That doesn't make any sense."

Contradiction: They provide inconsistent narratives to confuse the victim. Contradiction involves the gaslighter offering inconsistent or opposing statements and narratives over time. These contradictions are not accidental — they are deliberate efforts to confuse the victim, destabilize their sense of certainty, and make them question their memory and understanding of reality. The gaslighter may: Frequently change their version of events, deny having said something, then later claim they did, claim "That's not what I said" after previously insisting on something else, Provide conflicting explanations for their behavior, leaving the victim unsure which version is true. By constantly altering the narrative and contradicting themselves, the gaslighter causes the victim to feel disoriented, second-guess themselves, and eventually become more reliant on the gaslighter to define "truth" for them.

Psychological Impact: Gaslighting is a form of emotional and psychological abuse, and over time, it can have serious effects on a person's mental well-being. Gaslighting can lead to severe emotional and mental distress, with long-lasting psychological consequences. Because gaslighting systematically undermines a person's perception of reality, it erodes their sense of self and security over time. Some of the key psychological impacts include:

Self-Doubt: Gaslighting can have a profound impact on a person's mental state, causing them to doubt their own thoughts, memories, consequences and judgment. So that Victims begin to question their own thoughts, memories, and judgment. This constant second-guessing creates chronic insecurity and indecisiveness, even about simple matters. Gaslighting can make victims question their own perceptions of reality. Gaslighting can erode a person's confidence in their decision-making abilities and Victims may become overly reliant on the gaslighter for validation and guidance.

Anxiety and Fear: The unpredictability of gaslighting - coupled with the fear of being told they are "wrong" or "crazy" - often results in persistent anxiety. Victims may become hyper-vigilant, afraid to speak up or express feelings. Gaslighting can cause significant emotional distress. Victims may experience decreased self-esteem and confidence. Gaslighting can contribute to the development of trauma and anxiety disorders. Gaslighting can be traumatic, leading to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including flashbacks, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors.

Depression: Gaslighting can contribute to the development of depressive symptoms, including feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness. As confidence erodes, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness take root. Victims may feel isolated, trapped, and powerless to stop manipulation. A person being gaslit may withdraw from others due to confusion or shame, believing they are at fault or losing grip on reality. This

isolation exacerbates feelings of loneliness and can increase the risk of depression, as social support is often a key protective factor against mental health issues. Gaslighting is often a prolonged form of emotional abuse. The constant mental strain of trying to navigate a reality that feels unstable or manipulated can lead to high levels of stress, which can significantly impact mental health, contributing to anxiety and depression.

Loss of Self-Esteem: Victims of gaslighting may come to distrust themselves and others, believing that they are unworthy of healthy relationships. This breakdown in trust can make it more difficult for them to reach out for help or to form connections that could support their emotional well-being. Repeated invalidation leads to feelings of worthlessness and low self-worth. Victims may internalize the belief that their perceptions and emotions are always flawed.

Emotional Confusion: Gaslighting often involves the gaslighter turning the blame on the victim, making them feel responsible for the abuse or the dysfunction in the relationship. This can create feelings of guilt, self-blame, and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness—emotions strongly linked to depression. Contradictory messages and shifting narratives create cognitive dissonance, leaving victims feeling disoriented and emotionally unstable. Victims of gaslighting may come to distrust themselves and others, believing that they are unworthy of healthy relationships. This breakdown in trust can make it more difficult for them to reach out for help or to form connections that could support their emotional well-being.

Dependency: Because gaslighters make the victim doubt their own reality, victims may increasingly rely on the gaslighter to define what's "true," further deepening control and manipulation.

Isolation: Victims often withdraw from others, fearing they won't be believed or fearing further humiliation, which intensifies feelings of loneliness.

Psychological Theories Behind Gaslighting

Power and Control Theory: Gaslighting is a strategy to dominate another person psychologically. Power and Control Theory suggests that gaslighting is not just about manipulation for its own sake—it's a tactic used to gain and maintain dominance over another person. This theory is often used to understand dynamics in abusive relationships, whether personal, professional, or institutional. The gaslighter seeks to control how the other person thinks, feels, and behaves, often to maintain superiority, avoid accountability, or manipulate outcomes in their favor. Gaslighting involves repeated use of denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying to destabilize the victim's sense of reality. Over time, this leads the victim to rely more on the gaslighter's version of truth. Just like in the Power and Control Wheel used in domestic violence frameworks, gaslighting often coexists with other manipulative tactics-such as isolation, intimidation, and emotional abuse.

By undermining the victim's confidence and perception of reality, the gaslighter gains psychological control. The victim may eventually feel too disoriented or insecure to resist or leave the situation.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory: The manipulator creates conflict between the victim's beliefs and reality, causing mental discomfort, which the manipulator then exploits. Cognitive Dissonance Theory, developed by psychologist Leon Festinger, refers to the psychological discomfort people feel when they hold two or more conflicting beliefs, values, or perceptions. In the context of gaslighting, this theory helps explain why victims often stay in toxic situations, despite knowing something feels wrong. This contradiction creates mental and emotional discomfort-cognitive dissonance-because humans naturally want consistency in their thoughts and beliefs. Gaslighters exploit this internal conflict to maintain control. By repeatedly creating dissonance, they push the victim to abandon their own judgment in favor of the gaslighter's narrative.

Projection: Often, the gaslighter projects their own faults or misdeeds onto the victim. Projection is a psychological defense mechanism in which a person unconsciously attributes their own unwanted thoughts, feelings, or behaviors to someone else. In gaslighting, projection is often used deliberately as a manipulation tactic to shift blame, avoid accountability, and confuse the victim. A gaslighter may accuse the victim of doing exactly what they are doing cheating, lying, being manipulative, or overreacting. This turns attention away from their own behavior and puts the victim on the defensive. Projection allows the gaslighter to avoid facing uncomfortable truths about themselves. By placing those traits onto others, they maintain a false image of control, innocence, or moral superiority. If a gaslighter is being dishonest, they might accuse their partner of hiding things or lying. This not only diverts suspicion but also makes the victim feel guilty or ashamed, leading them to question their own actions and intentions.

How to Respond to Gaslighting

Document Interactions: Keeping records helps you stay grounded in your reality and can be useful if you need to revisit the facts later (especially in work or legal situations).

Document key details such as:

a. Dates and times of conversations or incidents
b. What was said (include quotes if possible)
c. What happened before and after
d. Your feelings and reactions

Use a private journal, app, or digital notes to record everything. Be factual and objective. Keep backups in case the gaslighter tries to delete or access your records.

Seek Support: Talk to someone you trust-like a friend, family member, or counselor. They can help you see things more clearly, remind you of the truth, and support you emotionally.

Set Boundaries: Limit exposure to manipulative behavior. Protect yourself by limiting time and interaction with the person who is being manipulative. It's okay to say no, walk away, or avoid certain conversations.

Practice Self-Validation: Trust your feelings, instincts, and memory. Believe in your own thoughts and feelings. Trust what you remember and how you feel, even if someone else tries to make you doubt it.

STOP it from happening:

Do not normalize it

Do not be played by misinformation

Making notes

Seeking professional help

Keeping records

TRUST YOURSELF

Practicing meditation/Yoga

Saying NO

Conclusion:

Gaslighting, whether intentional or unintentional, can have a deep and lasting impact on a person's self-esteem, confidence, and trust in their own thoughts. In educational settings, it often goes unnoticed, masked behind authority or humor, but its effects can silence students and hinder their curiosity. What begins as a genuine question can end in self-doubt and silence if not handled with empathy and respect. It is important for educators and peers to foster an environment where questions are welcomed, not ridiculed—where learning is encouraged, not stifled. By understanding gaslighting and recognizing its subtle forms, especially in everyday interactions, we can build spaces that promote open dialogue, emotional safety, and genuine growth. Only then can students truly thrive, not just academically, but also as confident, thoughtful individuals.

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