

‘Gaslighting’: Royal Palm therapist on this destructive behavior

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Ingrid Bergman plays the target of “gaslighting” behavior from her evil husband, played by Charles Boyer (left) in the 1944 film “Gaslight.” Joseph Cotten (right) plays a detective who helps her realize the truth — that she’s not crazy, she’s just a victim of manipulation. Bergman won an Oscar for this role.

“The manipulator holds his prey hostage with accusations of her irrational thinking, because he must always be right and have his own way.”— CONNIE INGRAM, therapist from Royal Palm Beach

If you’re a size 2, but your husband insists you’re too fat, do you believe him?

If your spouse criticizes how you load the dishwasher and yells at you for not getting it right, is her anger your fault?

If the new president says he won by “a landslide,” when he actually won by a historically narrow margin, are you confused?

All three of these scenarios could be considered “gaslighting” — a word that CNN predicted last week will be one of the most used of 2017.

What’s it mean? “Gaslighting” is manipulation, an attempt to skew reality by telling people that what they know happened did not happen, and what they know is true is not true.

It comes from literature — most popularly, the 1944 film “Gaslight,” starring Ingrid Bergman as a woman whose husband makes her doubt her sanity. A piece of jewelry goes missing, and he blames her. A painting disappears, and he says she moved it. She sees gas lights flickering, and he denies they are.

In the movie, the husband uses gaslighting to cover up his thieving, murderous ways.

In real life, perpetrators use gaslighting — lying, denying, contradicting, misdirecting, blaming the victim — as a way to throw victims off balance. Slowly and insidiously, spouses who have been “gaslighted” start to question their every thought and decision.

In a [recent column](#), Washington Post advice columnist Carolyn Hax wrote: “Gaslighting is by definition so subtle that victims blame themselves for their abuser’s handiwork.”

She wasn’t talking about Donald Trump, and this story isn’t about him.

It’s about a form of abuse that happens in so many homes, it’s the subject of endless self-help books and therapy sessions.

Therapist [Connie Ingram](#), who has a practice in Royal Palm Beach, sees gaslighting behavior so often she’s currently running a counseling group specifically to help affected women break free.

“These women have allowed the behavior of the gaslighter to gradually beat them down, so that they are no longer even able to define their own reality,” Ingram says. “The victim of the gaslighter knows something is not quite right when she first experiences this manipulation, but she often explains the behavior away in an attempt to get along.”

Going along to get along is “emotional-relational suicide,” Ingram says.

“We try to get along because we all have an innate desire to want consistency and to be able to trust those with whom we are in relationship,” she says. “The manipulator holds his prey hostage with accusations of her irrational thinking, because he must always be right and have his own way. The manipulator appears strong and in control but typically is working hard to hide his insecurity. He exploits others and disregards their rights, which creates difficulty in maintaining healthy relationships.”

Victims contribute to their own pain, Ingram says, because they keep trying to fix a partner whose underlying personality disorder makes him or her unwilling or unable to see a problem.

“Though the victim adamantly defends her position, over time, she begins to succumb to the anxiety and pressure of the gaslighter because of her lack of confidence, her de-selfing, and her over-functioning to keep the relationship intact and peaceful,” Ingram says. “These attempts are futile because the manipulator is limitless in his ability to create cognitive and emotional chaos in the victim, due to his endless message that she is the one with the problem.”

Got that?

Pretty soon, what seemed blue looks green — and you think maybe you’re crazy.

People pleasers and insecure women are the gaslighter’s main targets — because they tend to have emotional responses to behavior that is clearly not logical.

“Manipulative people typically do not pre-plan their moves,” Ingram says. “They come from an underlying personality disorder and are played out step-by-step in collusion with the victim, who unwittingly encourages the manipulation.”

There’s only one way out, she says — by changing your response to the gaslighter.

Use logic, not emotion, says therapist Dr. Gordon Livingston, author of several best-selling advice books, including “Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart.”

Don’t confuse the gaslighter’s manipulations with reality.

“If the map doesn’t agree with the ground,” he says, “the map is wrong.”

Are you in a relationship with a gaslighter?

Therapist Connie Ingram, who has a practice in Royal Palm Beach, advises that you pay attention to these key things:

Does the relationship feel one-sided and unbalanced in that only the goals of the manipulator are being advanced at the expense of the person being manipulated?

Do you feel trapped in the relationship?

Do you feel good about yourself in the relationship?

Does your partner add value to you and the relationship?

Does your partner take advantage of your giving nature?

Are the agendas of the other person covert and coercive?

Does your partner engage in intense blaming and put-downs or pressure?

Does your partner promise to provide something if you go along with what he wants?

Does your partner threaten you with some sort of loss if you don't succumb to his wishes?

Does your partner retaliate to regain control if you exert power over him?

Can your partner show vulnerable emotions?

It's hard to spot a gaslighter at the beginning because they are unlikely to manipulate right away. They focus on observing the other person's vulnerabilities to learn how they can exploit them for their own purposes. However, watch how the gaslighter relates to other people, and you may see glimpses of control as a red flag.

You cannot change a gaslighter. Focus on changing yourself and assess the value of the relationship. Get help to learn how to stand firm and learn assertive skills. Most of all, get a firm grasp of who you are – your true self — and decide what you will and will not do in the relationship.

The only way to disable manipulative behavior is to change yourself. Take the risk of exploring your own feelings, why you react as you do and how to use alternate responses. Work with an experienced therapist. The benefits of making these personal changes are far-reaching and may change the dynamics of your relationship or prepare you for a healthier relationship.