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**GASLIGHTING**

# Why Gaslighting Was the Word of the Year

Disagreeing isn't gaslighting—until it is.

Posted December 1, 2022

Reviewed by Vanessa Lancaster



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**KEY POINTS**

- The term "gaslighting" has been showing up in our conversations, on Netflix, in music, and politics.
- "Gaslighting" is a term that is often misused. Disagreeing or having another opinion is not gaslighting until it is.
- Gaslighting appears in matrimonial affairs, medical communities, workplaces, and families. It is not just in romantic relationship interactions.
- Gaslighting red flags include second-guessing yourself, feeling confused or crazy, not feeling like your "old self," and isolating yourself.

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Gaslighting is the word of the year. Are we surprised?

On November 28th, Merriam-Webster announced that "gaslighting" is their word of the year: "the act or practice of grossly misleading someone, especially for one's own advantage." "Gaslighting" surprised Merriam-Webster's staff in emerging as the most popular word due to a "1740 percent increase in lookups for gaslighting, with high interest

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the honor of recording some talking points during musical interludes). Then there's the miniseries "Inventing Anna," the documentary "Bad Vegan," and the political thriller "Gaslit."

This gaslighting boom is a double-edged sword, as many people misuse and water down the concept, substituting gaslighting for "bad behavior." Merriam-Webster's admittedly simple and broad definition is evidence of how the term has evolved since it first appeared in academic discourse in the 1980s in reference to women's socialization and then infiltrated popular psychology to describe a specific type of destructive relationship.

"Gaslighting." The phrase originated from a 1938 mystery thriller written by British playwright Patrick Hamilton called *Gas Light*, which was made into a popular movie in 1944 starring Ingrid Bergman (Paula) and Charles Boyer (Gregory). In the film, Gregory manipulates his adoring wife, Paula, into believing she can no longer trust her own perceptions of reality.

As its origins reveal, "gaslighting" is more than isolated instances of deceit, disinformation, or manipulation. It refers specifically to the act of undermining another person's reality by denying facts, the environment around them, or their feelings. Experienced most often in a power dynamic, gaslighting happens in any number of interpersonal relationships, includ-

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ally be soul-destroying. It is the reason my seminal book on the topic (2007) is titled *The Gaslight Effect*.

Have you ever had a romantic partner say you were “imagining things” or that you were “too sensitive” or “so insecure” when you shared your thoughts, beliefs, or feelings about a particular situation? Undermining someone’s thoughts and emotions is a classic gaslighter technique that denies one’s perception of reality or challenges their trust in their own feelings.

#### THE BASICS

What Is Gaslighting?

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Most often, gaslighting takes place gradually, over a period of time, rather than as one or more isolated instances. The experience of continuous invalidation of how you feel about or how you perceive a situation can convince you that you are making up scenarios that don’t exist when what you are feel-

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**Gaslighting  
Safety Plan****Why Do People  
Do It?**

Recently medical gaslighting has been gaining attention, with doctors denying people their experience of feeling sick or being in pain and instead blaming illness and symptoms on psychological factors or a patient's uncommonly low tolerance for pain. And in a broader cultural context, gaslighting is infiltrating our social systems via large-scale power imbalances.

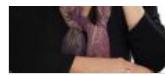
Paige Sweet, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan and author of *The Politics of Surviving*, writes about the phenomenon of cultural gaslighting:

Although we tend to think of gaslighting as a problem between two people in a relationship, it also unfolds as part of an unequal social context.

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- You often feel confused and even crazy at work.
- You're always apologizing.
- You frequently make excuses for your partner's behavior.
- You know something is terribly wrong, but you can never quite express what it is, even to yourself.
- You have trouble making simple decisions.
- You have the sense that you used to be a very different person—more confident, more fun-loving, more relaxed.
- You feel as though you can't do anything right.
- You wonder whether you are good enough.

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Robin Stern, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in private practice, is the author of *The Gaslight Effect: How to Spot and Survive the Hidden Manipulation Others Use to Control Your Life.*

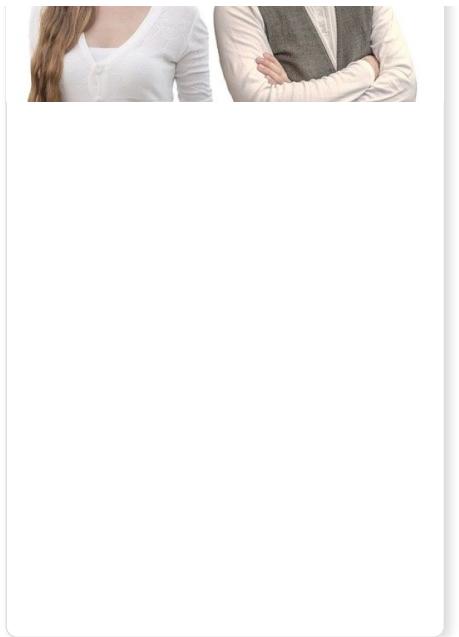
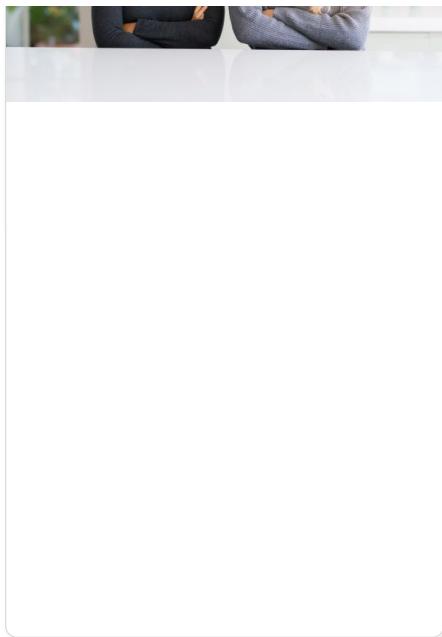
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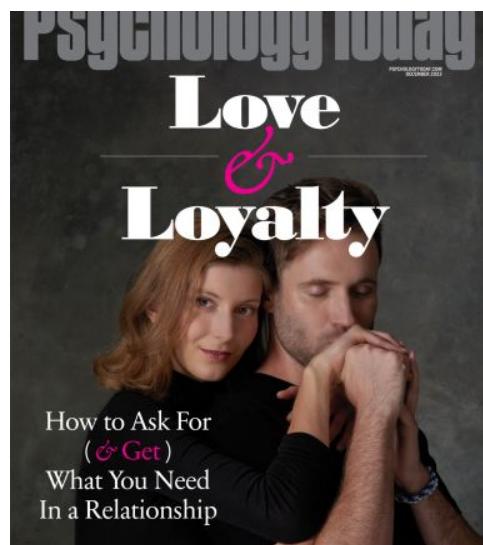
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