



**The Family Recovery Foundation
FIX YOUR FAMILY
MODULE 9**

Understanding and Responding to Gaslighting

Why Families Need to Understand Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a form of manipulation in a conversation where the person attempts to make others doubt their perception of reality, memory, or sanity. Understanding gaslighting can be crucial for families dealing with addiction, as it is often used to deflect responsibility and maintain control.

Recognizing gaslighting helps families set boundaries and protect their emotional health.

Dr. Robin Stern, author of *The Gaslight Effect*, explains that gaslighting:


1. Erodes a person's sense of self and reality by distorting their perception of events.
2. It can lead to emotional confusion and self-doubt. This tactic can be especially harmful in families affected by addiction, as it creates an environment where truth becomes malleable, making it harder to address core issues like substance use.

1. Key Signs:

🚫 Gaslighting Phrases That Deny Events: The person denies certain events ever happened, even when there is clear evidence to the contrary.

1. "That never happened."
2. "You're making that up."
3. "You must be confused."
4. "You imagined the whole thing."
5. "I don't remember it that way."
6. "You're remembering it wrong."
7. "You're being paranoid."
8. "I never said that."

Psychologist Dr. Ramani Durvasula emphasizes that denying events, especially repeatedly, causes victims to question their memory, leading to long-term confusion and emotional exhaustion.

 **Gaslighting Phrases That Minimize Emotions:** The gaslighter downplays the victim's feelings, making them feel like they are overreacting or too sensitive.


1. "You're overreacting."
2. "Calm down, it's not that serious."
3. "You're too sensitive."
4. "You need to toughen up."
5. "You're always so dramatic."
6. "Why are you making such a big deal out of this?"
7. "Other people have it way worse."
8. "You're being ridiculous."

Therapist and author Pia Mellody notes that minimizing emotions is a common tactic in codependent relationships. It invalidates the other person's feelings and perpetuates an imbalance of power.

 **Shifting Blame Gaslighting Phrases:** The person avoids responsibility by redirecting blame onto the victim.

1. "You made me do this."
2. "This wouldn't have happened if you listened to me."
3. "It's your fault I got so angry."
4. "If you weren't always nagging, I wouldn't react this way."
5. "You're the one who started it."
6. "I wouldn't have to lie if you weren't so controlling."
7. "You push me to act this way."
8. "You're the reason everything's falling apart."

According to Dr. Patricia Evans, author of *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, shifting blame distorts reality by making the victim feel responsible for the abuser's actions, which can prevent healthy confrontation.


 **Constant Contradiction Gaslighting Phrases:** The gaslighter consistently contradicts the victim's version of events or memories.

1. "You're not making any sense."
2. "That's not what happened—you're mixing things up again."


3. *"I never agreed to that."*
4. *"You're completely wrong about how that went down."*
5. *"I don't know where you got that idea."*
6. *"We already talked about this—you must've forgotten."*
7. *"You always remember things differently than everyone else."*
8. *"You're being inconsistent again, like always."*

 **Questioning Reality Gaslighting Phrases:** The person suggests the victim is imagining things or is mentally unstable.

1. *"You're just being delusional."*
2. *"You seriously need help."*
3. *"You're imagining problems that don't exist."*
4. *"No one else sees it the way you do."*
5. *"You sound crazy right now."*
6. *"You always jump to wild conclusions."*
7. *"Are you hearing yourself?"*
8. *"You've been acting really off lately."*

 **Withholding Information Gaslighting Phrases:** Refusing to engage in conversations or pretending not to understand the issue.


1. *"I honestly have no idea what you're talking about."*
2. *"Why are we even discussing this again?"*
3. *"That's not worth talking about."*
4. *"You're trying to start something for no reason."*
5. *"Let's not do this right now."*
6. *"This is pointless."*
7. *"I don't want to get into that."*
8. *"You're bringing up old stuff that doesn't matter anymore."*

 **Gaslighting with Positive Reinforcement:** The gaslighter mixes in positive comments or affection to confuse the victim.

1. *"You know how much I love you—I'd never try to hurt you."*
2. *"You're the only person who really understands me."*
3. *"I only say these things because I care so much."*
4. *"You're amazing—but sometimes you just overthink everything."*
5. *"You're so important to me. That's why I get upset."*
6. *"I don't want to fight—you mean the world to me."*
7. *"You're the best thing that ever happened to me. Don't ruin it over something small."*
8. *"You're so strong—don't let your emotions get the better of you."*

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Dr. Stern highlights that interspersing positive reinforcement with abusive tactics keeps the victim trapped in a cycle of hope and confusion, making it harder for them to see the manipulation.

 **Projecting Gaslighting Phrases:** The gaslighter accuses the victim of the behaviors they themselves are guilty of.

1. *“You’re always lying to me.”*
2. *“You’re probably the one cheating.”*
3. *“You’re so manipulative.”*
4. *“You’re the one who’s emotionally unstable.”*
5. *“You always twist the truth.”*
6. *“You don’t take any responsibility for your actions.”*
7. *“You’re trying to control me.”*
8. *“You’re gaslighting me right now.”*

 **Rewriting History Gaslighting Phrases:** The person changes past events to suit their narrative.

1. *“That’s not how it went down—you’re making stuff up again.”*
2. *“You said the opposite last time. Don’t you remember?”*
3. *“We never agreed to that.”*
4. *“You were fine with it back then—why are you upset now?”*
5. *“You’re rewriting the past to make yourself look better.”*
6. *“You’re confusing two different situations.”*
7. *“I was just joking—you took it the wrong way.”*
8. *“You’re only remembering the parts that make me look bad.”*

2. How Gaslighting Affects Families

- **Emotional Impact:** Gaslighting can leave family members feeling confused, anxious, or constantly questioning their reality.

*According to Dr. Harriet Lerner, author of *The Dance of Anger*, the erosion of trust and self-confidence that gaslighting causes makes it difficult for family members to make empowered decisions or maintain healthy relationships.*

- **Role of Addiction:** Those struggling with addiction may use gaslighting to deny their substance use or deflect blame, creating a cycle of manipulation.
- **Trust Erosion:** Gaslighting erodes trust within the family, making it difficult to address the addiction and move forward in a healthy manner.

3. Recognizing Gaslighting in Your Situation

- **Practical Exercises:**
 - **Keep a written record** of events (in a journal or phone note) immediately after they happen to track what was said and done.
 - **Talk to a trusted friend or therapist** to confirm whether your experience aligns with reality—external validation can break the fog.
 - **Save texts, emails, or voice messages** that document important conversations or agreements.
 - **Write down your emotions and physical reactions** after confusing interactions to stay anchored in your body's truth.
 - **Use grounding phrases** like *"I know what I saw"* or *"I trust my memory"* to re-center when someone tries to distort your perception.

4. Strategies for Responding to Gaslighting

- **Set Clear Boundaries:**
 - Example phrases to assert your reality:
 - "I remember it differently."
 - "That was how I experienced it."
 - "I need space when I start to feel this way. I feel unseen and dysregulated, so I'm stepping away from this conversation."
 - "If I continue to feel this way, I will end this discussion until we can talk respectfully."
 - "I won't engage in this conversation if I continue to feel blamed for my feelings."
 - "When I feel contradicted, I will walk away and we can revisit this when things are calmer."
 - "It's important to me that my feelings are heard. If I continue to feel dismissed, I will not continue this conversation."
 - "Since my reality continues to be questioned, I am going to step away and will get back to you when I am feeling better."
 - "When I feel disrespected and the tables turned on me for expressing my feelings, I will take a break until we can talk more productively."
 - "I respect your perspective, but if I am not validated for my experience, the conversation is over for me."

These phrases align with Dr. Brené Brown's work on vulnerability and boundaries, which emphasize the importance of protecting your emotional space while maintaining self-respect.

- **Set Emotional Boundaries:** Choose not to engage in manipulative conversations or arguments over facts.
- **Avoid Arguments Over Facts:** Stick to your truth simply, and avoid getting caught up in debating past events.

- **Seek Outside Support:** Therapy and trusted friends can help validate your reality and offer emotional support, ensuring you don't feel isolated.

5. Empowering Yourself and Your Family

- **Affirm Your Reality:** Trust your instincts and maintain confidence in your perceptions.
- **Focus on Self-Care:** Protect your emotional well-being by regularly engaging in self-care activities that restore balance and prevent emotional exhaustion.
 - Self-care practices are recommended by mental health professionals like Dr. Kristin Neff, who emphasizes that self-compassion and care are key to healing from emotional manipulation.
- **Family Communication:** Maintain open, honest dialogue within the family to create a supportive environment where manipulation cannot thrive.

Gaslighting can create significant emotional harm within families, especially in the context of addiction. By recognizing the signs, setting firm boundaries, and seeking external validation and support, family members can protect their mental and emotional well-being while navigating the challenges of addiction and manipulation.

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