

Recovering from a Narcissist

with Shahida Arabi, M.A. from <https://psychcentral.com/>



7 Gaslighting Phrases Malignant Narcissists, Sociopaths and Psychopaths Use To Silence You, Translated

By [Shahida Arabi, Bestselling Author](#). Last updated: 19 Mar 2019

Gaslighting is an insidious erosion of your sense of reality; it creates a mental fog of epic proportions in the twisted “funhouse” of smoke, mirrors, and distortions that is an abusive relationship. When a malignant narcissist gaslights you, they engage in crazymaking discussions and character assassinations where they challenge and invalidate your thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and sanity. Gaslighting enables narcissists, sociopaths, and psychopaths to exhaust you to the point where you are unable to fight back. Rather than finding ways to healthily detach from this toxic person, you are sabotaged in your efforts to find a sense of certainty and validation in what you’ve experienced.

The term “gaslighting” originated in Patrick Hamilton’s 1938 play, *Gas Light*, where a manipulative husband drove his wife to insanity by causing her to question what she experienced. It was further popularized in the 1944 film adaptation, *Gaslight*, a psychological thriller about a man named Gregory Anton who murders a famous opera singer. He later marries her niece, Paula to convince her she is going crazy to the point of being institutionalized, with the agenda of stealing the rest of her family jewels. According to Dr. George Simon, victims of chronic gaslighting can suffer from a wide array of side effects, including flashbacks, heightened anxiety, intrusive thoughts, a low sense of self-worth, and mental confusion. In cases of severe manipulation and abuse, gaslighting can even lead to suicidal ideation, self-harm, and self-sabotage.

Gaslighting can take many forms – from questioning the status of your mental health to outright challenging your lived experiences. The most dangerous culprits of gaslighting? Malignant narcissists, who, by default, use gaslighting as a strategy to undermine the

perception of their victims in order to evade accountability for their abuse. These perpetrators can use gaslighting callously and sadistically because they lack the remorse, empathy, or conscience to have any limits when they terrorize you or covertly provoke you. Gaslighting by a malignant narcissist is covert murder with clean hands, allowing the perpetrator to get away with their mistreatment while depicting the victims as the abusers.

I've spoken to thousands of survivors of malignant narcissists who have shared their stories of gaslighting, and below I include the most commonly used phrases malignant narcissists, sociopaths, and psychopaths employ to terrorize and deplete you, translated into what they really mean.

1. You're crazy/you have mental health issues/you need help.

Translation: You're not the pathological one here. You're just catching onto who I really am behind the mask and attempting to hold me accountable for my questionable behavior. I'd rather you question your own sanity so you believe that the problem is really you, rather than my own deceptiveness and manipulation. So long as you believe *you're* the one who needs help, I'll never have to take responsibility for changing my own disordered ways of thinking and behaving.

Malignant narcissists play the smirking doctors to their victims, treating them like unruly patients. Diagnosing their victims with mental health issues for having emotions is a way to pathologize their victims and undermine their credibility; this is even more effective when abusers are able to provoke reactions in their victims to convince society that they are the ones with mental health problems. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, some abusers will even actively drive their victims to the edge to concoct proof of their instability. The Hotline estimates that around 89% of their callers have experienced some form of mental health coercion and that 43% had experienced a substance abuse coercion from an abuser.

"Most survivors who reported their abusive partners had actively contributed to mental health difficulties or their use of substances also said their partners threatened to use the difficulties or substance use against them with important authorities, such as legal or child custody professionals, to prevent them from obtaining custody or other things that they wanted or needed." – The National Center on Domestic Violence and the Domestic Violence Hotline

2. You're just insecure and jealous.

Translation: I enjoy planting seeds of insecurity and doubt in your mind about your attractiveness, competence, and personality. If you dare to question my numerous flirtations, affairs, and inappropriate interactions, I'll be sure to put you back in your place in fear of losing me. The problem, as I'll convince you, isn't my deceptive behavior. It's *your* inability to remain confident while I perpetually put you down, compare you in demeaning ways to others, and eventually cast you aside for the next best thing.

Manufacturing love triangles and harems are a narcissist's forte. Robert Greene, author of *The Art of Seduction*, speaks about creating "an aura of desirability" which stirs a frenzied sense of competition among potential suitors. In abuse survivor communities, this tactic is also known as triangulation. It grants malignant narcissists a depraved sense of power over their victims. They actively provoke jealousy in their intimate partners in order to control them and paint them as unhinged when they finally react. When a victim calls out a narcissist's infidelity in any way, it is common for them to label the victims insecure, controlling, and jealous to avoid suspicion and to continue to reap the benefits of multiple sources of attention, praise, and ego strokes.

Remember: to someone who has something to hide, everything feels like an interrogation. Narcissists will often lash out in narcissistic rage, stonewalling, and excessive defensiveness when confronted with evidence of their betrayals.

3. You're too sensitive/you're overreacting.

Translation: It's not that you're too sensitive, but rather that I am *insensitive*, callous, and unempathic. I do not care about your emotions unless they serve me in some way. Your negative reactions provide me stimulation and pleasure, so please, do keep going. I enjoy putting you down for having legitimate reactions to my abuse.

According to Dr. Robin Stern, one of the effects of gaslighting include asking yourself "Am I too sensitive?" a dozen times a day. Claiming that victims are overreacting or oversensitive to emotional abuse is a popular way for malignant narcissists to override your certainty about the severity of the abuse you experienced.

Whether or not someone is a sensitive person is irrelevant when it comes to cases of psychological or physical violence. Abuse affects anyone and everyone of varying sensitivity levels, and its impact should not be taken lightly. A mark of a healthy partner is that they give you the space to feel your emotions and provide emotional validation, even if they do not agree with you. A malignant narcissist will excessively focus on your so-called sensitivity and consistently claim that you are overreacting rather than own their horrific actions when called out, regardless of how "sensitive" you may be.

4. It was just a joke. You have no sense of humor.

Translation: I love disguising my abusive behavior as just jokes. I like calling you names, putting you down, and then claiming *you're* the one who lacks the sense of humor to appreciate my depraved "wit." Making you feel defective allows me to say and do whatever I wish, all with a smile and a derisive laugh.

Disguising cruel remarks, off-color comments, and put-downs as "just jokes" is a popular verbal abuse tactic, according to Patricia Evans, author of *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*. This malicious tactic is very different from playful teasing which takes a certain amount of rapport, trust, and mutual enjoyment. When malignant narcissists dole out these unsettling "jokes," they can engage in acts of name-calling, taunting, belittling and contempt while evading the responsibility of issuing an apology or owning their vicious verbal assaults. You are then gaslighted into believing that it is your inability to appreciate the "humor" behind their cruelty, rather than the reality of its abusive intentions.

"Just jokes" are also used to test boundaries early on in an abusive relationship; what you may have rationalized as a tone-deaf or off-color comment in the beginning can escalate into psychological violence quite quickly in the hands of a narcissist. If you find that you have a partner who laughs at you more than they laugh *with* you, run. It will not get better.

5. You need to let it go. Why are you bringing this up?

Translation: I haven't given you enough time to even process the last heinous incident of abuse, but you need to let it go already so I can move forward with exploiting you without facing any consequences for my behavior. Let me love-bomb you into thinking that things will be different this time around. Don't bring up my past patterns of abusive behavior, because you'll then recognize that this is a cycle that will just continue.

In any abuse cycle, it's common for an abuser to engage in a hot-and-cold cycle where they periodically throw in crumbs of affection to keep you hooked and to renew hope for a return

to the honeymoon phase. This is a manipulation tactic known as intermittent reinforcement, and it's common for an abuser to terrorize you, only to return the next day and act like nothing has happened. When you *do* recall any abusive incidents, an abuser will tell you to "let it go" so they can sustain the cycle.

This form of abuse amnesia adds onto your addictive bond to the abuser, also known as "trauma bonding." According to Dr. Logan (2018), "Trauma bonding is evidenced in any relationship which the connection defies logic and is very hard to break. The components necessary for a trauma bond to form are a power differential, intermittent good/bad treatment, and high arousal and bonding periods."

6. You're the problem here, not me.

Translation: I am the problem here, but I'll be damned if I let you know it! I'd rather subject you to personal attacks as you bend over backwards trying to hit constantly moving goalposts and arbitrary expectations of the way I think you *should* feel and behave. As you spend most of your time trying to fix your fabricated flaws while always coming up short of what I deem "worthy," I can just sit back, relax, and continue to mistreat you the way I feel entitled to. You won't have any energy left to call me out.

It's common for abusive partners to engage in malignant projection – to even go as far as to call their victims the narcissists and abusers, and to dump their own malignant qualities and behaviors onto their victims. This is a way for them to gaslight their victims into believing that they are the ones at fault and that their reactions to the abuse, rather than the abuse itself, is the problem. According to Narcissistic Personality clinical expert Dr. Martinez-Lewi, these projections tend to be psychologically abusive. As she writes, "The narcissist is never wrong. He {or she} automatically blames others when anything goes awry. It is very stressful to be the recipient of narcissistic projections. The sheer force of the narcissist's accusations and recriminations is stunning and disorienting."

7. I never said or did that. You're imagining things.

Translation: Making you question what I did or said allows me to cast doubt on your perceptions and memories of the abuse you've experienced. If I make you think that you're imagining things, you'll start to wonder if you're going crazy, rather than pinpointing the evidence which proves I am an abuser.

In the movie *Gaslight*, Gregory causes his new wife to believe that her aunt's house is haunted so she can be institutionalized. He does everything from rearranging items in the house, flickering gas lights on to making noises in the attic so she is no longer able to discern whether or not what she's seeing is real. He isolates her so that she is unable to gain validation. After manufacturing these crazymaking scenarios, he then convinces her that these events are all a figment of her imagination.

Many victims of chronic gaslighting struggle with the cognitive dissonance which occurs when their abuser tells them that they never did or said something. Much like reasonable doubt can sway a jury, even the hint that something may *not* have happened after all can be powerful enough to override someone's perceptions. Researchers Hasher, Goldstein and Toppino (1997) call this the "illusory truth effect" – they discovered that when falsehoods are repeated, they are more likely to be internalized as true simply due to the effects of repetition. That is why continual denial and minimization can be so effective in convincing victims of gaslighting that they are indeed imagining things or suffering from memory loss, rather than standing firm in their beliefs and experiences.

The Big Picture

In order to resist the effects of gaslighting, you must get in touch with your own reality and prevent yourself from getting entrapped into an endless loop of self-doubt. Learn to identify the red flags of malignant narcissists and their manipulation tactics so you can get out of disorienting, crazy-making conversations with malignant narcissists *before* they escalate into wild accusations, projections, blame-shifting and put-downs which will only exacerbate your sense of confusion. Develop a sense of self-validation and self-trust so you can get in touch with how you really feel about the way someone is treating you, rather than getting stuck attempting to explain yourself to a manipulator with an agenda.

Getting space from your abuser is essential. Be sure to document events as they happened, rather than how your abuser tells you they happened. Save text messages, voicemails, e-mails, audio or video recordings (if permitted in your state laws) which can help you to remember the facts in times of mental fog, rather than subscribing to the distortions and delusions of the abuser.

Engage in extreme self-care by participating in mind-body healing modalities which target the physical as well as psychological symptoms of the abuse. Recovery is important to achieve mental clarity. Enlist the help of a third party, such as a trauma-informed therapist, and go through the incidents of abuse together to anchor yourself back to what you've experienced. Malignant narcissists might attempt to rewrite your reality, but you don't have to accept their twisted narratives as truth.

References

Evans, P. (2010). *The verbally abusive relationship: How to recognize it and how to respond*. Avon, MA: Adams Media.

Greene, R. (2004). *The art of seduction*. Gardners Books.

Hasher, L., Goldstein, D., & Toppino, T. (1977). Frequency and the conference of referential validity. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 16(1), 107-112. doi:10.1016/s0022-5371(77)80012-1

Martinez-Lewi, L. (2012, November 10). Narcissist's Projections are Psychologically Abusive. Retrieved March 19, 2019, from <http://thenarcissistinyourlife.com/narcissists-projections-are-psychologically-abusive/>

Logan, M. H. (2018). Stockholm Syndrome: Held Hostage by the One You Love. *Violence and Gender*, 5(2), 67-69. doi:10.1089/vio.2017.0076

Simon, G. (2018, May 11). Overcoming Gaslighting Effects. Retrieved March 19, 2019, from <https://www.drgeorgesimon.com/overcoming-gaslighting-effects/>

Stern, R., & Wolf, N. (2018). *The gaslight effect: How to spot and survive the hidden manipulation others use to control your life*. New York: Harmony Books.

Warshaw, C., Lyon, E., Bland, P. J., Phillips, H., & Hooper, M. (2014). Mental Health and Substance Use Coercion Surveys. Report from the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health and the National Domestic Violence Hotline. *National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma and Mental Health*. Retrieved [here](#). November 5, 2017.