

Lies, Gaslighting, Misinformation:

Finding our way through
October 2025



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Introduction to this document

Gaslighting. Lies. Misinformation. Disinformation. Manipulation. Coercion.

These words help illustrate the experiences of many survivors of intimate partner violence, helping survivors and advocates share how abusive partners try to control the reality of survivors and their communities. These tactics are not just used in abusive relationships though. They are also used by institutions, governments, and people in positions of power to gain and maintain control over communities and individuals.

This publication explores the meaning of gaslighting and misinformation, their impacts, and what individuals and communities can do in response.

This document uses examples from the recent past. It would not be possible to keep this publication entirely up to date, given the volume of new examples and stories that come out to illustrate these ideas every day.

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Understanding what is happening

For many people, it is becoming increasingly difficult to discern what is happening in our world. Every day the news is filled with misleading or inaccurate headlines. Governments are issuing statements claiming they get to decide the “truth.”

The US government, the UK government, and many others are claiming that they get to decide:

- What healthcare is appropriate. Governments are taking away access to gender affirming care, abortion, and health insurance/Medicaid.
- What gender someone is. The UK recently decreed that trans women are not women. The US government denies the existence of trans and intersex people.
- What diseases are dangerous. The US is trying to decrease access to COVID and measles vaccines, and providing unscientific guidance on prevention.
- Whether a genocide is happening. The genocide of Palestinians has been consistently denied by the US government, going so far as to punish people who speak out about it.
- Whether people have a right to due process. People in the US are being kidnapped, incarcerated, and forcibly moved to other countries without any due process.

At the same time, survivors of intimate partner abuse are describing how their partner would constantly lie to them about the abuse or try to convince the survivor that they did not know what they knew.

Trans people share about loved ones who don't believe them about their gender, about colleagues suddenly treating them differently after they come out, and even about others in queer communities trying to explain their experiences to them.

It's clear that lies, gaslighting, and disinformation are widespread.

Gaslighting is the term for when someone tries to convince another person that their understanding of reality is wrong. Gaslighting includes intentionally misleading or lying to someone in order for the gaslighter to get what they want. Most people feel that gaslighting requires intent, but not everyone agrees with that. It might sound like:

“You’re always late.”

“You fell down the stairs; I didn’t push you.”

“You’re not a woman.”

Disinformation refers to efforts to mislead the public or groups of people with inaccurate information. It’s a bit distinct from misinformation – because disinformation is intentional or purposeful, while misinformation can easily be spread by accident. Disinformation may include

- False or misleading statistics – either entirely fabricated or shared without accurate context. For example, misleading information about vaccine safety.
- Fabricated news stories – events that did not happen or speculation that is presented as fact. For example, blaming transgender people for violence they did not commit.
- Inaccurate pictures – faked images or images from a different event. For example, using a picture of a riot to illustrate a story about a completely different event, such as a protest.

There are also many types of emotional abuse and manipulation that sometimes overlap with gaslighting. **Emotional abuse** can include insults, putdowns, being mean, yelling, threats, and more. Sometimes these tactics are used along with gaslighting to further the control that someone has.

It can be incredibly useful to have terms that describe our experiences – such as abuse, gaslighting, DARVO (deny, attack, reverse victim and offender), etc. At the same time, we don’t have to precisely label everything in order to recognize that it is causing us harm. Being insulted or harassed is harmful – whether or not you believe what the person says about you.

DARVO is a term that was created in the 1970s to describe the tactics harm-doers use to blame victims and avoid accountability. It stands for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. [Learn more.](#)

SORVO is a term developed by [Sexual Violence Prevention Association](#). “Systemic Oppression, Reverse Victim, and Offender (SORVO) describes how oppressive groups weaponize sexual violence, and accusations thereof, to justify systemic oppression. The SORVO framework enables the recognition of sexual violence propaganda and the prevention of systemic injustice in action.” [Learn more.](#)

People, companies, and governments lie for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they believe the lies that they are telling. Often the lies benefit them in some way – emotionally, physically, financially, politically.

Additional examples

[In one study, 47% of LGBTQ folks reported medical gaslighting.](#)

[People with Long COVID report high rates of gaslighting.](#)

[Gaslighting is a common tactic used by fascist regimes.](#)

The impact

It's exhausting and sometimes devastating to be lied to or gaslit.

Gaslighting does more than impact us emotionally. It can have concrete consequences on our health, employment, social networks, and more. A gaslighting boss can also fire you, write poor performance reviews, and make sure you don't have a good reference for future jobs. A gaslighting partner can also convince your friends and family not to trust you, can take your kids or home.

With gaslighting specifically, these tactics are often used to benefit the gaslighter. The boss may not want to give you a raise or doesn't want to admit they were wrong about something. The partner may want to ensure you don't leave them. The physician may not want to admit they don't know how to help.

The tactics that are used in interpersonal relationships are also used by those in all sorts of positions of power – bosses, dictators, presidents, billionaires, and more. Survivors and advocates for a long time have pointed out abusive dynamics in the government, organizations, or in media.

One way we see misinformation/lies show up in the media is through coverage of celebrity cases of abuse. In many of these we might see [DARVO](#) being used

For example, an abusive person may claim mistreatment by their victim in public before allegations of their own abusive behavior come out in order to win sympathy. It has come to light that some public relation firms frequently use these tactics. The way that the media covers these cases can either dispel misinformation or contribute to it.

Similarly, governments can cause harm. In addition to promoting disinformation, governments can make laws, policies, and funding decisions that have dramatic impacts on people's lives. A gaslighting government can also ensure you can't get healthcare, stay in a shelter, get identification, or be called your name. A gaslighting government can arrest you for wearing a mask or kidnap you and traffic you to another country, then lie to everyone about why they did it.

Even domestic violence (DV) organizations have used controlling tactics against staff and survivors.

Learn more about some of these tactics here:

<https://eminism.org/readings/pdf-rdg/wheel-sheet.pdf>

DV agencies sometimes specifically gaslight trans/nonbinary survivors. This might look like denying their gender, dismissing the abuse they experience because of the gender of the perpetrator, or claiming that the survivor does not need the support the survivor knows that they need. Trans/nonbinary survivors are frequently turned away from mainstream services. If they are not outright denied access, they may experience hostility from providers and other survivors or be told they are “too complicated” to serve.

Cultural and personal impacts

Gaslighting and disinformation not only impact individuals but also affect our cultures. It can be helpful to explore the impact on our society of institutional gaslighting and lies.

People living in the United States right now are by no means the first people this has happened to. This country was built on a lie that the land was empty. That lie still persists in myths about native peoples and the ways that their lives are consistently erased. These lies have very real consequences that enable genocide and the (attempted) erasure of entire groups and cultures.

Not only are indigenous people harmed by these lies, but settlers/colonists benefit. The perpetrator of this abuse is able to gain money, land, lives and power through insisting that another group is inferior or nonexistent. The perpetrator in this case, may even further their power by controlling what can be taught in schools – ensuring that an inaccurate portrayal of history is taught in order to maintain their own power.

When a government, political and cultural leaders, and others in positions of authority routinely spread misinformation and gaslight the public, society is impacted.

- Communities no longer have any sense of what to believe. Anything could be the truth or a lie.
- It becomes difficult to identify the root causes of issues. The wrong “problems” get addressed.
- People’s own stories and experiences get twisted.
- It becomes harder to quit believing something, once we have invested in it.

The things we tell each other play a part in shaping our reality.

It feels impossible to talk about gaslighting without talking about living in a culture that lies to us. The more mis- and disinformation get spread, the more lies there are, the more we are blamed for things we didn't do, the harder it gets to engage in a consensus reality, and the more extremism, violence, and conspiracy take hold.

We may know that people are lying about us or our communities. We may know that's not what we said. It can still be really impactful to have people lie about us and twist our words. Not just emotionally, but economically.

Survivors share many examples::

- Survivors have been told they are promoting some sort of radical queer agenda, simply because they existed.
- Bosses have lied about events and admitted to intentionally giving everyone bad evaluations.
- Doctors have repeatedly said that someone is sick because they refuse to do physical therapy or exercise – things that are proven to make certain conditions worse.

One person shared, “I know all these folks are wrong, but all of them had some sort of power over me – over my job, over my health. And it still hurts to think about these situations, and they're the “little” stuff – not even touching on the most gaslighting, emotionally harmful people I've known.”

Our sense of justice

Some people may be able to cope with or brush off other people's lies and manipulations relatively easily. Common advice says to detach ourselves from the other person's actions, to not engage in arguments. However, this advice ignores what being exposed to injustice can do to people's well-being.

Further it can be very difficult to detach, due to the pervasiveness of lies and misinformation. People may need to stay connected to current events for many reasons, including their personal or community well-being.

For some people, their sense of justice, of right/wrong, is incredibly strong and incredibly important. Constant exposure to lies or gaslighting can have a profound impact on a person's wellbeing and even lead to burnout. In these situations, simply refusing to engage with the gaslighting is not helpful, because the fact that the lies are happening is what is causing the most harm.

There are not easy answers for this. On an individual level, we do not control other people's behavior and cannot stop them from lying. At the same time, what we all do shapes the world that we live in. We do have the power to shift cultural norms to create a more honest and just culture.

What can we do? ---

Many tips for addressing gaslighting do not stop people from causing harm; instead, these tips focus on building our capacity to not get caught up in the lies or in arguments about them. This advice can be very helpful and important. However, everything that needs to change does not change. As individuals and organizations, we can take care of ourselves and our communities and build a culture built on truth and compassion.

Protect your heart

Your worth is not determined by others.

Gaslighting is often designed to make us doubt ourselves – our truth, our memory, our skills, our knowledge. Whether the gaslighter is the a partner, a family member, an institution, or a boss – they do not get to decide who you are. You deserve to be treated with care and respect. You have the right to safety. People have different methods of reminding themselves of this. You may do affirmations in front of a mirror, or you may have something you tell yourself whenever you have to interact with this person.

This might look like “Owen doesn't have my best interests at heart.” Or you could remind yourself, “What Jill thinks of me does not determine who I am.”

Get affirmation.

Humans are social creatures. Even the most introverted of us needs other people in some way or another. That's okay! That's actually kind of a cool thing about us – we are dependent on each other! This means that it's a good thing to get support from others. Think about who in your life can provide affirmation to counter the gaslighting. Maybe it's a trans-affirming TikTok that reminds you how beautiful and beloved we are. Maybe it's a colleague that can remind you that you are doing okay at work (and that your value as a person isn't tied to your job). Maybe it's a friend who can help you remember what actually happened when your partner is telling you they never hit you.

Disengage.

You may have to keep interacting with the person/people causing harm. We can't always easily switch jobs, countries, or partners – and we may not want to. Disengagement is more about mentally disconnecting. This might look like not arguing with the person, leaving the room when they lie, or changing the subject. “That’s not how I remember it. I’m not going to argue with you.” “That’s not what happened.” “I’ve asked you to not talk to me this way, so I am going to leave the room now.”

Part of what is so exhausting about gaslighting is that it can push us into a cycle of arguing and defending ourselves, sometimes even keeping us in contact with someone we would rather not be in touch with – just so that we can try to stop the lies. Disengaging does not mean that we agree with the other person, but it can save us from the back and forth.

In some cases, it may be safer to appear to go along with the gaslighter. “Okay, I hear your concerns.” “Thank you for the feedback.” Perhaps it’s a work situation. You know that you turned things in on time, but your boss will never believe you. You counted the cash right, but the manager made a mistake. However, you may have noticed that arguing puts your job in jeopardy. You can disengage by ending the conversation – you haven’t necessarily agreed with the misinformation, but you also didn’t keep the argument going.

Protect your life/livelihood

Gaslighting takes all forms, and some may be connected to a greater risk of harm or violence than others. Gaslighting from a partner who also uses physical violence may require a different response than with a partner who does not do that. Responding to a boss may vary based on how likely you are to lose the job and what sort of financial security you have. We’ll often use different strategies interacting with the police than we would with a friend.

There are some things that we can do when there are greater risks to our well-being – whether it’s our physical safety or our livelihood – job, home, etc that are at risk.

Get receipts

Document what happens to you. This might be with pictures or videos. It could mean saving screenshots of text messages and emails. It could mean journaling or taking notes after a meeting or an incident. For safety reasons, ideally this documentation would be

kept somewhere safe from the person who is gaslighting you and would be taken without their knowledge).

At work this might look like – sending an email after a meeting that summarizes the key points so that it's in writing. It might mean taking pictures of your timecards so the boss can't say you were late. With a partner it might mean daily journals – today Sam said I was flirting but I wasn't. Yesterday Layla hid my cane from me.

Documentation serves multiple purposes.

- First it can help keep you connected to your reality. Especially if you struggle with remembering details or doubt yourself, documentation can be a good thing to look back at.
- Second, it can help you identify patterns.
- Third, it may be able to help you if the gaslighter tries to get you in trouble. If a boss tries to fire you or discipline you, you'll have documentation of your work. If you decide to get a protection order against a partner, you'll have notes of times you've been threatened by them.

Seek support and safety

Connecting with others may help with support and safety. Sometimes this can come from commiserating together. One survivor shared, “At one workplace it really helped me to talk with another coworker experiencing the same harms – we could both say “yes, that really happened.” We also helped each other do our work and eventually look for other jobs.”

Friends, family, therapists, neighbors – anyone can be part of your safety network. They may be able to help you make a plan to get out of a bad situation or they may help you cope with it and get your needs met.

If physical violence is part of the situation, it may be helpful to work on a safety plan with someone with expertise, such as a domestic violence advocate.

Protect your community

Much of the gaslighting that people experience these days is directed at whole communities. Trans people, immigrants, people of color, women, activists, people with disabilities, so many communities are under attack.

Acknowledge the injustice.

We can start by acknowledging that what is happening is wrong. It's harmful. It doesn't align with our values. It hurts and causes damage. While doing this doesn't change the harm happening, it does let people know our beliefs and it helps us build community with others. It's also important for other people to witness opposition. That can help people feel less alone; it can provide inspiration and information.

Speak truth to community (rather than speak truth to power).

While sometimes those with power will listen and learn, there are other times when those with power are mostly interested in maintaining their power and wealth. When that is the case, even our best arguments don't make a difference to power's opinion. We can see examples of this in legislatures across the country – when countless trans people and their loved ones spoke out against harmful policies, and the policies still passed.

When this is the case, speaking truth still matters, but who we speak it to may change. We speak truth to our communities, our loved ones, our neighbors – to those who share values with us and to those who may be moveable.

For example, the current administration may not care that a new Health and Human Services (HHS) report on trans health is inaccurate, harmful, and unscientific. Yet, a medical provider with limited experience needs to know what is true, as does a newly out trans person who has questions about medical transition.

Organizational Responses

Anti-violence organizations can also play a part in resisting gaslighting and disinformation.

Challenge victim-blaming

The idea that people are responsible for the harm done to them is commonplace in US society. It even shows up in work with survivors. Anti-violence organizations can train their staff to recognize and challenge victim-blaming. This might be helping other agencies understand dynamics of abuse. It might look like assessing our own services to ensure that our advocacy does not reinforce victim-blaming.

Assess internal practices and policies

Advocates and survivors have reported that domestic violence programs and other anti-violence organizations sometimes cause harm. These agencies can assess their practices for opportunities to invest in accurate information, compassion, and trauma-

informed services. This may include looking at HR policies, complaint and conflict procedures, program rules, and supervision practices. Agencies can recognize the ways that their staff and volunteers have power over clients and how that may impact the services they provide.

The [SOAR collective](#) is one organization working to improve conditions for anti-violence staff. They have done research and created recommendations for the anti-violence field, found [here](#).

Share accurate information

Organizations routinely share information with staff, clients, and the community. We all can ensure that we are sharing accurate information by checking sources, considering bias, and engaging thoughtfully. Organizations can also consider how they share information. Guides from We Make the Future and the American Bar Association Commission on Sexual and Domestic Violence provide information about messaging and rhetoric.

https://www.americanbar.org/groups/domestic_violence/our-projects/lgbt-legal-access/anti-trans-rhetoric/

https://www.wemakethefuture.us/resources-docs/messaging-our-freedoms?utm_source=em20250818

Promote media literacy

Media literacy is our ability to understand and assess the messages in the media we consume. This includes identifying bias, recognizing fake or sensationalized news, and bringing awareness to the values or messages embedded in media. Media literacy helps people to recognize how cleaning product commercials send the message that women are responsible for house cleaning. Media literacy also helps people to determine if they consider a news article reliable, based on the sources and references it uses.

Conclusion

Survivors of violence and advocates often see the ways that truth gets twisted. The criminal court system is set up to be adversarial – to try to show that victims are lying or to blame for what happened. Investigations get conducted in ways that make survivors doubt themselves and call into question all their actions. Abusive people often try to control the story of the harm to avoid accountability.

Survivors should always get to choose for themselves whether or not they share their stories. Sharing stories on our own terms, in our own ways, can be healing. Many survivors have written, made art or music, or found other ways to express themselves that are validating and healing.

We all can work towards a culture of believing survivors and resisting systemic gaslighting.



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