

Vulnerability Exploitation: Twelve Typologies of Gaslighting Found in Committed Couple Relationships

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Figure 1. Photo created on Canva.com

At this juncture in our culture, most of us know the general concept of gaslighting. For those of you that are doubting your recollection, allow me to jog your memory. Gaslighting is phenomenon where one particular party (i.e., the gaslighter) mischievously attempts to cause another party (i.e., the discerning party), usually someone with whom they are intimately connected to some degree, to question or doubt their own sanity or perceptions of reality. Also known as “[crazy-making](#),” the phenomenon of gaslighting is done through various forms of cognitive and emotional manipulation. Below are a few definitions of gaslighting by various sources:

[The] psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator.

~ [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)¹

The word gaslighting is used to describe the emotional and psychological trauma that results when a person is chronically lied to or manipulated by a loved one. ~ [Michelle Mayes, LPC, CSAT-S](#)²

Over the last decade as a mental health professional specializing in working with individuals and couples who have experienced sexual infidelity, I have come to believe that gaslighting behavior found in couple relationships impacted by betrayal trauma has one main objective – *to manipulate one into questioning*

¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gaslighting> (retrieved 2/17/2023)

² Retrieved via email from Michelle Mayes to author on 2/19/2023

their own perceptions of reality in effort to distract or deter said individual from discovering incriminating evidence that could lead to unveiling the dark secrets of the one desperate to keep them hidden.

Although the goal of gaslighting might be singular, the method by which one chooses to accomplish this goal could be many. However, despite the chosen method, the effectiveness of the gaslighting effort is dependent on the gaslighter's ability to exploit the vulnerabilities of the one being gaslit. In other words, at the heart of this phenomenon is what I call "vulnerability exploitation."

What Is Vulnerability Exploitation?

In my clinical practice, I often find myself saying, either to clients or other practitioners, that *vulnerability is the life-blood of a healthy committed couple relationship*. Vulnerability may be what is required for healthy functioning relationships, but it by no means comes easy to us. Making ourselves vulnerable goes against our natural instincts for survival and self-preservation. In my opinion, it is our ability to intentionally and continuously make ourselves vulnerable to one another that truly sets us apart from other species. In other words, our ability to be vulnerable to one another is what makes us human.

In order for a couple to grow closer to one another, each party must first determine that they are emotionally and physically safe with one another. However, just because this level of safety is accomplished by the couple, doesn't mean their threat detection systems automatically goes offline. No, that part of the brain continually stands guard scanning the environment for potential danger; and partners are more than capable of tripping the alarms of one another. This happens in the healthiest of couple relationships.

When we find ourselves in this situation, which is often emotionally charged, we must work against our natural instinct for self-preservation by quieting our internal alarm and lowering our defenses so that we can respond with love, compassion, dignity, respect and self-respect. One ingredient that needs to be present to some degree in order for couples to do this effectively is trusting that that the partners or spouses will reciprocate an appropriate level of vulnerability in response to the vulnerability shown to them.

When I think of couple vulnerability, I think of words like *love, trust, care, compassion, and safety*. I believe we, as human beings, experience the deepest forms of trust and intimacy in relation with our life partners. What makes gaslighting behavior so disturbing, in my opinion, is that it is this type of vulnerability that gaslighters look to exploit; thus, *vulnerability exploitation* is another way to characterize and conceptualize gaslighting behavior as the term itself not only reveals the gaslighter's playbook, but it also exposes the sinister and destructive nature of that playbook.

Are Gaslighter's Evil?

After reading the previous section, you might be wondering if all gaslighters are psychopaths and serial killers. I believe it is important to understand that although the behavior associated with gaslighting is dark and sinister to varying degrees, the gaslighter often is not. For many years now as a mental health professional, I have worked in therapy with partners who were skilled in the art of deception in this way; however, more often than not, they are stricken with grief and remorse when they take a deep dive into this phenomenon and discover the pain it has caused someone they truly love. Although sociopaths and

psychopaths are not beyond making regular use of gaslighting behavior, [authentic guilt and remorse is usually not a typical response when they examine the error of their ways](#).³

Note: Just because it is possible, or even probably, that your partner is not a sociopath, doesn't mean you should ignore your internal alarm for danger. The injury caused by gaslighting trauma is can be deep and very painful; thus, treatment options should be taken seriously and explored with careful consideration.

³ Signs of a Sociopath - <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/signs-sociopath> (retrieved Sept. 17, 2023)

The 4 Types of Vulnerability Exploitation

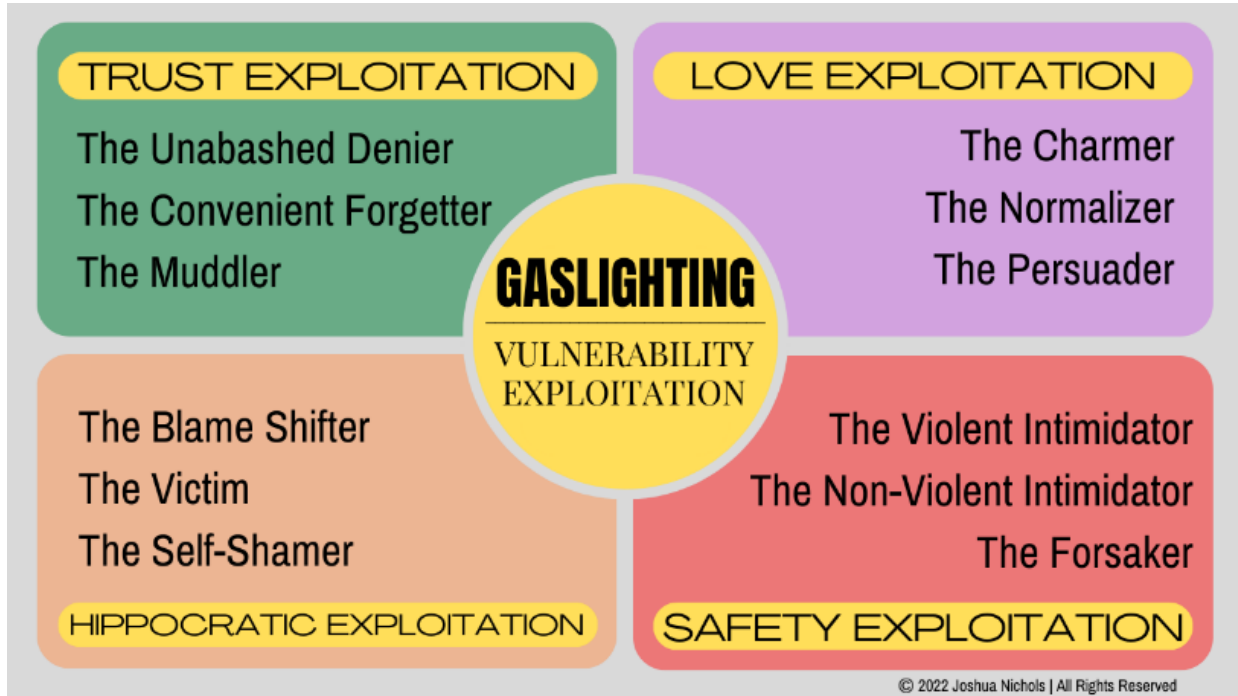


Figure 2. Graphic created on Canva.com

Now that we have determined that not all gaslighters are psychopaths, let’s take a closer look at the phenomenon itself. In my work as a practitioner in the area of betrayal trauma recovery, the gaslighting phenomenon seems to be ever present as it is a common form of self-preservation utilized by sex addicts and chronic adulterers alike.

As mentioned above, a gaslighter can only be a gaslighter if they take the opportunity to exploit the vulnerabilities of the one they are gaslighting. Below, I have identified four categories of vulnerability exploitation from my experience as a mental health professional. Within each category, I have identified three methods that gaslighters may or may not utilize to exploit that particular vulnerability of the other party involved.

Trust Exploitation. Trust is an important part of any healthy couple relationship. Gaslighters seem to know this intellectually and intuitively; thus, they will often take the opportunity to exploit that trust in effort to keep the partner from discovering their secrets. I have identified three ways gaslighters exploit that trust.

The Unabashed Denier. This type of gaslighter exploits the trust of their partner with their ability to confidently and effortlessly deny any accusation or suspicion on

behalf of the discerning party despite the amount of evidence presented. The emotional response of shock, confusion, appall, or even outrage can create varying

degrees of doubt within the discerning party. It appears that they must first lie to themselves in order to convince their partners of the lie. I am reminded of a quote

by the character [George Costanza](#) in the TV comedy, [Seinfeld](#), “It’s not a lie...if you believe it.”

What sells the lie for this type of gaslighting is the gaslighter’s adamant expressions of denial, passionate pleas for belief, and convincing conveyance of certainty. They often make declarative responses in the extreme, such as:

- *I would never....*
- *You have to believe me....*
- *How could you even suggest....*
- *You know me....*

The Convenient Forgetter. This type of gaslighter exploits the trust of their partner by conveniently being unable to recall the

details to the concern being presented to them by the discerning party. In essence they are skilled in weaponizing memory loss. After all, how can one argue their grievance or alarming situation when the other person in question simply has no memory of it? They will often say things like:

- *I just can’t recall.*
- *I absolutely have no memory of that.*
- *You know I don’t have a good memory.*
- *If that was something I did, I think I would remember.*

Similarly to how the unabashed denier is better served if they first believe the lie, the convenient forgetter may have created mental and emotional roadblocks (i.e.,

compartmentalization), which conveniently makes it easier for them to “forget.”

The Muddler. This is one that is skilled in shifting the focus off of themselves and on to some thing or even someone else. They are a master of distraction. The shift or distraction experience can range from *subtle* to *abrupt*. These gaslighters will at times use tactics such as:

- *Answering a question with a question,*
- *Excessive use of hypotheticals, or even*
- *Spewing word salad responses often leaving the other party frustrated, confused, and uncertain how to respond.*

Love Exploitation. Love is a wonderful yet complicated feeling. In order for love to serve its relational purpose, it requires us to put our blinders on to some degree. When we love someone, we find ourselves being less judgmental, and more compassionate and understanding. Love allows us to be more empathetic to and less dismissive of our partners. It’s a wonderful, yet scary feeling because love is not only at the helm of our most meaningful and intimate moments, it is also at the helm of our most painful and heartbreaking experiences. In other words, it is because of this little thing called love that we feel so hurt and foolish when betrayed. Many gaslighters intuitively recognize the power that love has over us; thus, they at times may take advantage of that emotional reality in effort to keep their circus of secrets going.

The Charmer. This person has weaponized likeability. They seem to naturally understand the behavioral, verbal, and/or emotional cues that penetrate beyond the discerning party’s walls of

defensiveness, anger, and resentment. They do this by plucking the perfect combination of heart strings so that the love blinders go up and red flags continued to be ignored or overlooked.

Partners of charmers are often deceived by the contrast of the bad or questionable behavior coupled with innocent and loving attributes such as:

- *A sweet and soothing voice,*
- *A calming face, and/or puppy-dog eyes.*
- *Always choosing the right words or combination of words that may seem poetic at times.*

After all, how could someone so sweet and loving be caught up in something so dark and sinister, right?

The Normalizer. This type of gaslighter is skilled in reframing deviant or alarming behavior as “normal.” When this type of gaslighter is successful in normalizing harmful or alarming behavior, the discerning party is often left with only one other conclusion – that they, themselves, are the abnormal

one for feeling alarmed and unsettled.

The normalizer may make use of common expressions in effort to discredit the concerns of their partner. For example:

- *Why do you always make a mountain out of a mole hill?*
- *Is this really the hill you want to die on?*
- *It is what it is.*

The Persuader. This gaslighter is likely very skilled at the two aforementioned types. This person not only makes use of their charm and ability to normalize as a way to keep discerning parties in the dark, they also work to convince them to partake in the behavior in question alongside them.

This is common in relationships impacted by infidelity. Some acting out partners have been known to play on the love of the suspecting partner by persuading them to partake in activities perceived as unbecoming to the other partner. This offers the gaslighter an extra layer of protection. After all, if things go south, how could the betrayed partner ever accuse them of deception when they themselves participated as consenting adults?

When it comes to the skill and craftiness of The Persuader, “consensual” might not be an accurate reflection of what is truly going on here.

Hippocratic Exploitation. I believe that the vast majority of functioning adults in the world truly have no interest in doing harm to their fellow homo sapiens. The concept of “do no harm” is often what we think of when we or others make reference to the [Hippocratic Oath](#). Gaslighters who partake in Hippocratic exploitation in essence exploit one’s natural tendency of good will toward others if they feel that is what is necessary to keep their secrets secret.

The Blame-Shifter (i.e., partner-blaming). This type of vulnerability exploitation may sound self-explanatory, but these gaslighters take distraction to a whole other level by repetitiously making the innocent party out to be “the bad guy.” Blame-shifters may lie, cheat, and steal, but

once they are caught, the discerning party’s integrity and character is what gets thrown on the chopping block.

- *“Why were you going through my stuff?”*
- *“If you weren’t such a prude....”*
- *“I tried to tell you, but...”*

- *“What you’re doing right now is why I why I did what I did....”*

It’s important to note that because they are exploiting the good will of someone who loves or cares deeply for them, these discerning parties are often manipulated into feeling remorseful and

apologetic for the suffering they seemingly have caused. Victims of skilled blame-shifters may find themselves buying into unrealistic misnomers, such as, having the power to “drive someone to drinking” or wielding the power to “drive someone into the arms of another.” In essence, skilled blame-shifters are not only good at relinquishing themselves from responsibility, they are also skilled at convincing the discerning party that they have no one to blame but themselves.

The Victim (i.e., other-blaming). This gaslighter is skilled at spinning the narrative to make it appear as if they are the victim in any given situation. This type of vulnerability exploitation may feel similar to blame-shifting, but there are some differences. Although the blame-shifter may take the opportunity to weaponize their own victimization, whether real or perceived, they do so in effort to make the case that someone else is more at fault for the grievance they are being presented with. The Victim, however, isn't very interested in shifting the blame (although they may do so inadvertently), as much as

they are interested in making a case that portrays them as more of a victim than the person they have hurt. This often leaves the discerning partner caught between a rock and hard place.

“Do I set aside self in order to be a good Samaritan (rock) or do I acknowledge my own suffering as real and not to be deterred by the convincing cries of a trickster frightened by the discovery of secrets (hard place)?”

The Self-Shamer (i.e., self-blaming). This form of vulnerability exploitation on the surface might appear as if the gaslighter has had a breakthrough and is attempting to take responsibility; but, in reality, the gaslighter has weaponized their own genuine sense of guilt and shame in effort to create an emotional double-bind within their partner. Partners of self-shamers often find themselves in an emotional tug-a-war match. In one corner stands a cluster of emotions ready and willing to confront the wrongdoer. On the other end, however, stands only one player, who very well might be the most powerful player of all -

compassion. And who is standing in the corner whispering sweet nothings in Compassion's ear? The gaslighter!

The self-shamer is different from the blame-shifter and the victim. The blame-shifter focuses on putting the blame on to the discerning partner. The victim isn't all that interested in blaming others as they are in being the primary victim. The self-shamer's primary focus is accessing intense feelings of shame and worthlessness to generate true feelings of empathy and compassion in the discerning party. If successful, the objective shifts from holding the offending party accountable for their actions, to becoming an emotional support and cheerleader for the said individual.

- *“I am a real piece of....”*
- *“You deserve someone way better than me.”*
- *“Why are you even with someone like me?”*

These are just a few examples of how self-shamers are able to manipulate the hearts of their partners.

Safety Exploitation. This form of vulnerability exploitation very well may be the scariest and most alarming of all the aforementioned types. Partners who find themselves in a relationship with gaslighters who exploit the safety and well-being of others should be careful not to dismiss the potential for real anger and sociopathic character traits of the partner in question. Anyone fearing for their safety should err on the side of caution by trusting their gut and [taking action](#) to get to place of safety.⁴

The Violent Intimidator. This person is willing to be violent in words and/or actions in effort to generate a level of fear in their partners that makes genuine concern and rational thought dangerous to express. They may never “lay a hand” on their partner, but instead, throw or break items, punch walls, and/or violently yell or scream. They can also be intrusive of one’s personal space and possessions. They may be very skilled in the art of psychological control and non-verbal intimidation. When this is effective, the discerning party finds themselves in a position where trusting their gut and the reality-based evidence becomes too risky to pursue. Plus, someone who gets that bent of shape must be innocent, right?

The Non-Violent Intimidator. This gaslighter is skilled in the art of coercion. They use various forms of verbal threats to create a level of discomfort or fear in their partners so they will stop looking and stop digging. Memory often conveniently comes back once they realize that they are caught. With their backs against the wall, the gaslighter reminds their partner of all the bad things that will ensue if they keep pursuing. They convincingly present the potential for a Bizarro World⁵ experience where the discerning partner is the “bad guy” because of their “excessive digging” and the gaslighter is the victim of a “ruined life” because of the obsessive digging. All the discerning partner has to do to become the hero in Bizarro World is to stop “digging” and “let it go.”

This form of gaslighting turns the table by painting the hero as the *embracer of lies*, and the villain as the *pursuer of truth*.

The Forsaker. This type of safety exploiter is known for weaponizing the relationship itself in effort to get the discerning partner to back off. This type of gaslighter exploits the discerning partner’s fear of losing the relationship. They often do so by threatening to leave, and painting a bleak picture of what life would be like after the fact. They might exploit certain insecurities in their partners such as the fear of being unlovable and/or the discerning partner’s fear of not being able to survive or live happily on their own. Variations of the phrase, “What would you do without me,” are commonly uttered from the lips of the Forsaker.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of gaslighting has become [more popular than ever](#). Despite its newfound fame in the realm of pop culture, it has been my experience that gaslighting behavior has

⁴ National Domestic Violence Hotline | 800-799-7233 | Text line: 88788 | www.hotline.org

⁵ A world where everything is the exact opposite. Up is down, first is last, good is bad, wrong is right, white is black, logical is illogical, giving is taking, insanity is sane, liberty is tyranny, and vice versa. It's a place where literally, the sky is forest green and the trees are sky blue. – The Urban Dictionary (UrbanDictionary.com)

time and time again proven to be harmful, destructive, and divisive. My goal is that this article at minimum will help to shed a little more light on the phenomenon in hopes that we can become more equipped in recognizing it when it happens; and then calling it out when it does.

About the Author. *Joshua Nichols is a licensed marital and family therapist and certified sex addiction therapist. He is co-owner of Family Solution Counseling, a small group practice in Oklahoma City with a primary emphasis in betrayal trauma recovery from a team-approach model. Josh also finds a lot of joy in writing. Other well-received works of his include his article on [Reflection Aggression](#)⁶ and his two-part series on [Mister Rogers and Sex Addiction](#)⁷.*

⁶ It Looks Like “Gaslighting,” but it’s NOT: Introducing Reflection Aggression - <https://tinyurl.com/4rutsv5x>

⁷ Managing Your Superpower [part 1]: What Mister Rogers Has in Common with Sex Addicts - <https://tinyurl.com/22cjm669>

Managing Your Superpower [part 2]: What Recovering Sex Addicts Can Learn from Mister Rogers - <https://tinyurl.com/8fzn989a>