

WHAT IS GASLIGHTING?

PODCAST #15 - REVISED TEXT (11 min.)

There are lots of ways to drive someone crazy. Today I'm going to be talking about one of them – – it's called gaslighting.

The term comes from the title of a play and, later, movie with that name. The plot of the movie—which is the most popular version of the story-- is simple: Ingrid Bergman plays a young heiress whose husband, played by Charles Boyer, attempts to drive her crazy in order to lay claim to her family's jewels. One way that he does this is by manipulating the gas lights in the house and then denying her perceptions that the lights appear to flicker. He isolates her and mounts a campaign to challenge her sense of reality. He appears to be succeeding until an outside detective, played by

Joseph Cotton, comes into her home and validates her perceptions of the flickering gaslights. She is then able to see what's been going on and finally confronts her husband.

Gaslighting, then, refers to situations in which someone attempts to drive someone else crazy. It involves the attempts of one person, the victimizer, trying to impose his or her judgment on the second person, the victim. In real life, as opposed to the movies, usually the victimizer uses gaslighting to disavow his or her own mental disturbance by making the victim feel that he or she is going crazy. And, importantly, this is a process with which the victim complies.

Gaslighting can be extreme or mild, and the damage it does can vary widely. On one extreme,

especially when the abusive figure is a parent and the victim is a child, the object of gaslighting can be damaged to the point of psychosis. On the other extreme, gaslighting is often a disturbance in marital communication that has at least the potential to be clarified and resolved.

Consider this example, taken from a clinical case reported by psychoanalysts Vic Calef and Ed Weinshel: A man is driving his family through city streets at 60 or more miles per hour. He drives calmly, with his arm resting on the window ledge, affecting an air of nonchalance. He evidences no concerns for his family's safety, but does repeatedly warn his wife and children to keep an eye out for the police. His wife and kids are in a state of near panic as he ignores their plea for him to slow down. In fact, he demeans them for their

anxiety. He appears completely content that he is behaving normally and that the rest of the family is overly emotional and irrationally concerned. Fortunately no catastrophe occurs.

In words and deeds, this man gaslights his family. He's recklessly endangering them, but denies this fact with his exaggerated nonchalance, and attacks them for what is clearly rational worry.

I've seen this kind of thing happen repeatedly in marriages in which one partner—usually the man, but not always-- is being unfaithful and/or addictively using drugs or alcohol. The “crime” has to be hidden and other people are made to feel crazy for suspecting that there is any problem at all. There's an old saying in the recovery movement that the addict or alcoholic is as “sick as his\her secrets.” Such secrecy is often achieved

through the process of gaslighting those who are closest and therefore most likely to see the truth. The truth of the matter has to be hidden and the perceptions and beliefs of others have to be discounted.

When this happens between the parent and child, it is especially destructive because the perpetrator, the parent, has an awesome authority to shape the reality and morality of the child, a child who, after all, is utterly dependent on the parent for safety and love. If the person hurting you – the parent – is also the person to whom you go for love and comfort, conditions are ripe for gaslighting. The child is in an impossible bind – having to somehow integrate his or her real experience of abuse, with all of its attendant fear and rage, with depictions—depictions that the

child must of necessity hold-- of the parent as benign, nurturing, and caretaking. What is the child to do? One answer is that the child goes a little bit crazy, adapting to this impossible dilemma by maintaining the almost delusional belief that the problem is in the child, not the parents. The child is forced to believe that he or she is the bad one in order to maintain an illusion of parental love and goodness. Finally, the child may hold out for an imaginary solution in which the parent becomes loving and good again. This requires the child to distort reality however, and that is what is so damaging. The child's ability to test and judge reality itself becomes impaired.

One psychoanalyst, Leonard Shengold, described this process as "soul murder." And it's more common than we would like to think. In fact,

it is usually seen in most cases of severe childhood abuse, whether such abuse takes the form of physical violence, sexual molestation, or severe neglect.

I treated a patient many years ago who was in a psychiatric hospital because he showed signs of catatonia. This meant that he was frozen physically and psychologically, sometimes standing in one place in the middle of the day room for hours, unable to move forward or backward. I got a glimpse of the meaning of this symptom one day when his mother came onto the ward to visit him. She was a loud and overbearing woman who practically accosted her son with her arms wide open, plaintively calling to him to "give mom a hug and kiss." When she wrapped her arms around him tightly I could see that he visibly and

reflexively pulled back a little. She felt it too-- then dropped her arms and in a martyred and histrionic manner said something like "oh-- what's the matter you don't love your mother?!" But what was apparent to any observer was that her intrusive embrace triggered his quite normal and understandable recoil, which she then attacked him for. I can understand after seeing this why such a boy might remain frozen in time and space.

This example also illustrates what is called a "double-bind." This is a concept developed by social scientist, Gregory Bateson. A double-bind is an emotionally distressing dilemma in communication in which an individual (or group) receives two or more conflicting messages with one negating the other.

The double bind occurs when the person cannot confront the inherent dilemma and therefore ***can neither*** resolve it ***nor*** opt out of the situation. So the essence of a double-bind involves two conflicting demands neither of which can be ignored or escaped. This leaves the object of it torn both ways so that whichever demands the person tries to meet, the other demand can't be met.

The classic example of the double-bind is of a mother telling her child that she loves the child while at the same time turning away in disgust or at the same time inflicting corporal punishment as discipline. This is similar to what happened with my catatonic patient and his mother. The words are socially acceptable, but the body language is in conflict with the words. ***The child doesn't know how to respond to the conflict between the***

words and the body language. Because the child is dependent on the mother for his or her basic needs and safety the child is really in a quandary. Small children can't articulate these contradictions verbally but they can't ignore them or leave the relationship either. The result is that the child feels helpless and hopeless and often develops disorders in his or her thinking to boot.

Another example might be when one is commanded to "be spontaneous." The very command contradicts spontaneity, but it only becomes a double-bind when one can neither ignore the command nor comment on the contradiction.

Now some people might consider this to be similar to what Joseph Heller meant by a "catch 22." They are related but not the same thing. A good example of a Catch-22 occurs in the novel of

that name when the protagonist seeks a psychiatrist's letter excusing him from combat flying for psychiatric reasons. The psychiatrist basically tells the patient that since the wish not to fly in combat is a rational and normal wish, the patient can't then, by definition, be crazy and therefore can't qualify for a psychiatric excuse. Thus, a catch 22 is an impossible situation but not necessarily one that someone has to internalize and that might therefore, drive someone crazy.

When the Joseph Cotton character validates Ingrid Bergman's perceptions of the flickering gaslights, her husband's spell is broken and she can finally see the truth. When someone in the child's world is sane and validates what is going on with the gaslighting or double-binding parent, the child can be somewhat inoculated from damage. Sometimes, simply the presence of a

supportive and loving adult is enough because he or she functions as a port in the storm, as an island of sanity with which the developing child can identify. And, as adults, of course, the presence of a therapist who helps the patient face the reality of what happened and the damage that resulted can sometimes reverse and undo that patient's crazy childhood.

Ultimately, the solution can only be found in facing reality.