

How to survive gaslighting: when manipulation erases your reality

Ariel Leve offers strategies to stay resilient in the face of psychological abuse that distorts the truth – much like what’s coming from Trump’s administration

Ariel Leve

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Remain defiant: the most important tip if you want to face gaslighting. Illustration: Rob Dobi

Right now, many Americans listening to their president are experiencing what I experienced frequently as a child. Nothing means anything, and reality is being canceled. There is confusion, there is chaos, everything is upside down and inside out. When facts and truth are being discredited, how is it possible to know what to believe, especially when it comes from someone we expect to embody both ethics and etiquette?

It’s obvious to those already initiated. To those new to the phenomena: the president and the current administration are **gaslighting us**. It’s a term we are hearing a lot of right now.

The term “gaslighting” refers to when someone manipulates you into questioning and second-guessing your reality. It derives from a **1944 movie** – and the play and another film that preceded it – in which this happens to the heroine. What perhaps people don’t understand is how to manage and cope with it. For me, all it’s very familiar. I know this behavior well and I know how to navigate it.

As a child, I was experiencing a world where there was no emotional safety while being consistently told that I had a beautiful and happy childhood and that I was ungrateful. What was I complaining about? Yet what I was exposed to caused me to feel unsafe. And those feelings had a verifiable origin. Whether it was witnessing violent arguments or being on the **receiving end of inappropriate behavior**, when I confronted my mother with the truth, it was denied; my reality was disavowed and

asserting it would only instigate conflict. I was told that what I saw with my own eyes hadn't happened.

When I would confront my mother with things that she had said, or things that she had done, she would say I was making it up, that it was a lie. When I confronted her with facts, they were batted away. So it wasn't just that my reality was canceled, but that my perception of reality was overwritten.

As I wrote in my memoir, [An Abbreviated Life](#), it wasn't the loudest and scariest explosions that caused the most damage. It wasn't the physical violence or the verbal abuse or the lack of boundaries and inappropriate behavior. What did the real damage was the denial that these incidents ever occurred.

The erasure of the abuse was worse than the abuse.

When I was in my mid-30s, I had an encounter with someone who recognized me from when I was a child. "Are you so-and-so's daughter?" he asked. I nodded. He had been a guest at one of my mother's parties. After I left, he said: "I had always wondered how that little girl would survive. I had thought her only choices were suicide or murder."

When I was told he said this, I felt validation. And that line stayed with me for many reasons. This outsider observed what I was living through, and having him as a witness confirmed what I knew.

One of the most insidious things about gaslighting is the denial of reality. Being denied what you have seen. Being denied what you have experienced and know to be true. It can make you feel like you are crazy. But you are not crazy.

Dr Robin Stern, associate director at Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and author of [The Gaslight Effect](#) says that usually "when people are abused there are signs that you can point to that are much more obvious. Someone who has been hit or threatened for instance – it's easy to see and understand how they have been hurt. But when someone is manipulating you, you end up second-guessing yourself and turning your attention to yourself as the person to blame".

To illustrate this, she cites an example that is easy to understand. A close friend of hers was always running late. Initially, she pointed this out to him noting that it was not respectful. His response was to tell her she was "too sensitive". But over time, when this dynamic would continue to happen, it would lead to arguing and when she persisted he would say, "You really have a problem with time, don't you?" and she in turn, ended up thinking he might be right. She began to doubt herself. "I began to think – what's the problem if someone is late, maybe I'm not being flexible enough."

This is what she calls the gaslight effect. "Gaslighting over time leads to somebody experiencing the gaslight effect. Someone can try to gaslight you, but it can't happen unless you allow it."

This is the tricky part. Because when there is someone in a position of power or authority, someone you idealize, or even as in many co-dependent relationships –

when there is someone you are afraid to lose – their insistence that their reality is *the* reality can often cause you to doubt what you know to be true.

“We are living in a time where a lot of people are having a tough time deciding what’s real and feeling like they are being manipulated,” Stern says. “If they know something is true and somebody tells you it’s not true, holding on to your reality is essential. You can’t be gaslighted if you stay inside your own reality and recognize the manipulation when you see it.”

What’s happening on a national level is activating and retraumatizing a lot of people who have been gaslighted in the past. The crazy-making, mind-bending, massive confusion-inducing effects of our current administration’s recklessness with the truth and disregard for verifiable facts is creating an emotional and psychological whiplash. It’s affecting people who have been subjected to abusive relationships; people who feel emotionally vulnerable and it seems to stoke a nearly unprecedented rage in those of us who can see it and feel powerless to do anything to combat it. When people in the mainstream media are being discredited, how exactly are you supposed to call this out?

There were some strategies – which I didn’t know at the time were strategies – that helped me survive. And in these uncertain times, it is a way to stay sane.

Remain defiant

When I was a little girl about five or six, I wrote a story about running away from home. When my mother saw that story, she demanded I change it. Why would you write this story? It isn’t about me, is it? She knew it was about her and the chaos at home. I refused to change the story and that defiance was key. Trusting my version of reality. Not allowing it to be altered on demand. Resistance. This anger protected me, because I knew what I knew. It couldn’t be erased. Being defiant does not make you difficult. It makes you resilient.

Recognize there will never be accountability

The person who is gaslighting you will never be able to see your point of view or take responsibility for their actions. They will never get it. They will never say, “Oh, you’re right – you have a point.”

Acknowledgement is not on the cards. And asserting yourself is not just useless but harmful. Because the person gaslighting will never be able to respond to logic and reason – and so you have to be the one to recognize that logic and reason can’t be applied.

Let go of the wish for things to be different

The wish for things to be different is very powerful and inoculates you to the tumult. It allows you to continue to believe logic and reason will prevail. You want to believe the person will change. You want things to make sense. But they won’t. You want to

feel you are on safe ground. You have to let go of this wish. Because things will never make sense. You will never be heard.

Develop healthy detachment

I had to develop certain coping mechanisms, but there was a price. Behavior that was adaptive as a child becomes maladaptive as an adult: I was not trusting and always needing verification.

I became hyper-vigilant about clarity. There was no room for misunderstanding; no margin for error. I needed certainty in an uncertain world. But we live in an uncertain world, so there has to be a way to find balance.

Detaching from the gaslighting does not mean total detachment. It means distinguishing between the world of the gaslighter and the real world.

“Someone can try to gaslight you and once you can identify what’s going on, you can begin to turn off the gaslighting and heal,” Stern says. She points out that often people are willing to give up their reality in favor of hanging on to a relationship rather than rupturing it.

There are, she says, many different signs to recognize when you’re being gaslighted. “You feel confused and crazy. You’re always apologizing, wondering if you are good enough, can’t understand why you feel so bad all the time, or know something is wrong but can’t put your finger on it. You thought one thing, they say another; you can’t figure out which is right.”

A tip she offers for handling things is to write down what actually happened in the conversation. “Once you are not flooded with emotion, you can reflect rationally. Look at the conversation and see where it took a turn.”

When someone is so certain about what they believe and they keep on insisting and trying to convince you – over a period of time – it erodes your own perception. And having to verify reality is in itself destabilizing.

Stern poses an interesting question. “Are people upset because current leaders are telling them something they know isn’t true, or is it because they are upset other people might be believing it?”

With gaslighting, it feels as though the ground is always shifting beneath you. There is no center of gravity. And while we’re being told up is down and black is white, the only way to make sense of it is to remain resolute. Let people have their alternative facts. You’ll stick to reality.