



CONFRONTING GASLIGHTING

FIELD GUIDE

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SPIRITUAL FIRST AID™

Spiritual First Aid
Wheaton, Illinois
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INTRODUCTION

Everyone deserves respect in their relationships.

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation that causes a person to doubt their perceptions, memory, or judgment. It often involves an individual or group exerting control by denying facts, minimizing experiences, or rewriting events. Over time, gaslighting can distort a person's sense of reality and erode their confidence, leading to dependence on the manipulator for validation and safety.

This behavior occurs in relationships, workplaces, and families, often escalating from small contradictions into patterns of emotional harm. Those experiencing gaslighting frequently feel anxious and isolated, questioning if their thoughts are trustworthy.

Healthy relationships depend on truth and respect. When these foundations are undermined, individuals lose their ability to discern what is real. Recognizing warning signs is essential for rebuilding clarity.

In the following sections, this guide will help you better understand gaslighting, its impact, signs, and outline evidence-based and biblically informed coping practices and care strategies.





DEFINITION

Gaslighting involves intentionally or repeatedly causing another person to question their reality for the purpose of control. The term comes from the 1944 film *Gaslight*, where a husband manipulates his wife into believing she is losing her mind. In psychological terms, gaslighting is a sustained pattern of lying, contradiction, and manipulation that leaves the other person doubting their memory and perception.

Common gaslighting tactics include denying past events, minimizing harm, shifting blame, or presenting false information as fact. Manipulators may claim that others “misheard,” “imagined,” or “overreacted.” These interactions create a power imbalance that keeps the target dependent and unsure of what is true. Over time, this erodes confidence, autonomy, and emotional stability.

Truth and transparency are central to emotional health. Environments that encourage honesty and accountability allow individuals to maintain clear boundaries and realistic self-awareness. Recognizing gaslighting for what it is, psychological manipulation, makes recovery possible and reestablishes the dignity that comes from living in truth.





OVERVIEW

Gaslighting can take many forms, but it often develops through a consistent cycle of invalidation and control. Early interactions might include subtle put-downs or selective forgetfulness, which later escalate into outright denial of events. The manipulator's goal is to create confusion so the other person questions their perspective. Research links prolonged exposure to gaslighting to symptoms such as anxiety, hypervigilance, self-blame, and post-traumatic stress.

The effects extend beyond emotion. Gaslighting alters cognitive processing, as individuals struggle to separate memory from suggestion. This can make decision-making difficult and lead to the avoidance of situations that could invite conflict. Over time, people internalize blame, believing that their confusion or distress reflects personal weakness rather than a response to manipulation.

Certain environments may unintentionally enable gaslighting. Systems that prioritize hierarchy, appearance, or silence over accountability can create conditions where manipulation goes unchecked. Conversely, cultures that value openness, critical thinking, and mutual respect can disrupt these patterns before they cause lasting harm.





SIGNS OF GASLIGHTING

Recognizing gaslighting requires paying attention to patterns rather than isolated incidents. Emotional signs include constant self-doubt, guilt, and confusion after conversations or disagreements. Individuals may feel anxious when expressing opinions or recalling events, fearing that others will dismiss or contradict them.

Behavioral indicators include excessive apologizing, withdrawing from relationships, and relying heavily on others to confirm memories or decisions. Physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, or sleep disruption often accompany the psychological strain.

When trust erodes, people may also experience spiritual or existential questioning, wondering if they can still rely on their own discernment or moral compass. Reaffirming truth and integrity helps rebuild confidence, allowing both helpers and those affected to regain a sense of agency and perspective.





COPING PRACTICES

Coping with gaslighting requires intentional strategies that restore clarity and confidence. The practices below can help individuals ground themselves in reality and begin to rebuild trust in their own experiences.

SEEK CLARITY

Addressing gaslighting begins with grounding yourself in objective reality. Keeping a written record of interactions, including dates and key details, helps counter denial or distortion. When confusion sets in, reviewing these notes provides evidence to support memory and reduces self-doubt.

USE GROUNDING AND COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL TOOLS

Cognitive-behavioral techniques are especially useful. Learn to identify distorted thinking, such as overgeneralizing or self-blaming, that reinforces the manipulator's narrative. When you notice these thoughts, pause to assess whether they align with facts. Grounding exercises, such as steady breathing, identifying sensory details in the environment, or repeating affirmations like "My experience matters," can help restore focus and stability during moments of confusion.



RECONNECT WITH TRUSTED SUPPORT

Rebuilding supportive connections is also vital. Gaslighting often isolates people from trusted relationships. Reaching out to reliable friends, mentors, or counselors helps restore perspective and emotional balance. Sharing experiences in a safe setting can validate your perceptions and remind you that confusion and self-doubt are natural responses to manipulation, not evidence of weakness.

DRAW STRENGTH FROM FAITH

Faith and reflection can play a stabilizing role as well. Practices like prayer, meditation, or reading restorative passages that emphasize truth and protection can help strengthen resilience. Verses like “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer” (Psalm 18:2) remind individuals that stability and truth are possible even when trust has been damaged.

SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP IF NEEDED

Finally, seeking professional or organizational support is often essential, particularly in situations where gaslighting is ongoing or unsafe. Trauma-informed therapy can help rebuild confidence, set boundaries, and process residual fear or shame. Combining psychological care with trusted pastoral or community support creates a foundation for lasting recovery.





CARE STRATEGIES

Supporting someone who has experienced gaslighting requires clarity, patience, and trust-building. The strategies below offer practical ways to affirm reality, reduce self-doubt, and promote psychological safety. These approaches can help individuals feel seen, validated, and supported as they work to regain confidence and autonomy.

NORMALIZE THE EXPERIENCE

Many individuals affected by gaslighting question their reactions or blame themselves for the situation. Explaining that gaslighting is a recognized pattern of psychological manipulation can help them understand their experiences as valid. Normalization reduces shame and confusion, helping people see that what they are feeling is a predictable response to persistent deception rather than a personal failing.

USE EMPATHIC LISTENING

Allow individuals to share without interruption, correction, or immediate interpretation. Reflective responses, such as “It sounds like that experience made you feel uncertain,” can be grounding. This validation helps reestablish safety and reinforces that their perspective is credible.



ENCOURAGE REALITY TESTING

Help individuals check their experiences against objective evidence. Ask open questions like “What do you recall most clearly?” or “What would a trusted observer say about this situation?” Comparing perspectives fosters confidence in one’s own reasoning and perception. The principle found in John 8:32, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” captures the importance of pursuing clarity as part of healing.

SUPPORT BOUNDARY SETTING

Boundaries are essential for emotional and psychological safety. Encourage individuals to identify what behaviors they will no longer tolerate and to communicate limits clearly and calmly. Role-playing or rehearsing these boundaries beforehand can make them easier to enforce. Establishing distance from harmful dynamics, when possible, allows space for recovery and a renewed perspective.

PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Gaslighting can have complex psychological and relational effects that benefit from professional intervention. Encourage counseling with clinicians experienced in trauma and emotional abuse. Support groups and community resources can provide validation, education, and coping strategies. For helpers, knowing how to connect individuals to these resources is an important part of providing effective care.



MODEL TRUTH AND TRANSPARENCY

Helpers who communicate with honesty and consistency create a corrective experience for those recovering from gaslighting. Demonstrating reliability by keeping commitments, clarifying misunderstandings, and admitting mistakes shows that trustworthy relationships are possible. This model of integrity can restore hope and confidence in both personal and relational healing.

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Empathy builds trust and counters the invalidation caused by gaslighting.

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CONCLUSION

Gaslighting undermines the trust and autonomy essential for well-being. Recognizing manipulation restores access to truth and begins the healing process. Naming the behavior, gathering evidence, and seeking validation from trusted sources help individuals reclaim their sense of reality.

Recovery takes time and support. Psychological research highlights that healing from manipulation involves consistent reinforcement of self-trust, connection to supportive relationships, and professional guidance when necessary. Helpers play a key role by modeling reliability, empathy, and respect for personal agency.

Each step toward clarity strengthens resilience and restores freedom. The focus encouraged in Philippians 4:8 guides both helpers and those recovering toward clarity and peace.

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“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right.”

—Philippians 4:8

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SPIRITUAL FIRST AID

CO-FOUNDERS



Jamie Aten, Ph.D., is the Co-Founder of Spiritual First Aid. He is also the Founder and Co-Director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute, Blanchard Chair of Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership, and Co-Coordinator of the Trauma Certificate Program at Wheaton College. He is both a Hurricane Katrina and a late-stage early-onset cancer survivor. As a trauma psychologist, Jamie has responded to and researched disasters and mass traumas around the globe. He has published nine authored and edited books and over 150 scholarly publications, including some of the top peer-reviewed journals in psychology. His research has been supported by over \$12 million in awarded grants. He is frequently cited, interviewed, and published in outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *BBC News*, *Psychology Today*, *Religion News Service*, *Moody Radio*, and *Christianity Today*. In 2016, Jamie was awarded the FEMA Community Preparedness Champion Award at the White House. He also received the Early Career Award and Applied Psychology of Religion and Spirituality Award from the American Psychological Association's Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. He is co-author and co-host of the award-winning *The Better Samaritan* (column and podcast) at *Christianity Today*. You can follow Jamie on LinkedIn.



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Mental health is complex. Helping doesn't have to be.

BIBLICALLY-INFORMED

EVIDENCE-INFORMED

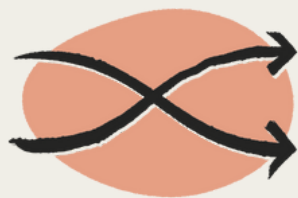
TRAUMA-INFORMED

Spiritual First Aid is a frontline peer-to-peer spiritual and emotional care intervention structured around our proven BLESS CPR framework.

When a friend approaches you with a crisis, do you experience...

- Uncertainty in what to say
- Missing signs of emotional struggles
- Personal burnout
- Hesitation in crucial moments
- Misinterpreting situations as trauma
- Compassion fatigue

In a world where mental health complexities can be overwhelming, Spiritual First Aid takes the guesswork out of spiritual and emotional care.



FLEXIBLE FORMATS

Complete the certificate course on-demand at your own pace or as part of a facilitator-led group.



ALL-INCLUSIVE

Receive 9 videos and a downloadable field guide, workbook, and 20+ tools.



HANDS-ON

Gain practical helping skills through activities and role-play simulations.