

Flying Free Podcast with Natalie Hoffman, Episode 320 - Am I Gaslighting Myself? Part One

NATALIE: Welcome to episode 320 of the Flying Free podcast. I am joined again today by my friend and fellow coach, Diana Swillinger.

Diana is a life and business coach, host of the Renew Your Mind podcast, and founder of the Renew Your Mind Institute Coach Training. She is also a coach inside of the Flying Free and Flying Higher Kaleidoscope. And today, we are going to talk about gaslighting, and more specifically, the question of whether or not people can gaslight themselves.

So I asked our butterfly community in the Kaleidoscope to weigh in. And we got 75 comments in the last 48 hours, and people are still commenting. So this touched a hot button in a lot of our members. And today we're going to share some of those perspectives, we're going to talk about what gaslighting is and isn't, and have a discussion around this topic.

And I just want to say right off the bat that we are not coming to the table with all of the answers. We're just coming for a discussion. That's it. So gaslighting, I look this up. I always like. Now, I'm, I'm, I'm into looking up definitions on AI because you can get like a really good overview of everything that's on the internet with AI.

First of all, hi, Diana.

DIANA: Well, hello. Hello. And yes, for AI, I, you know, I went down a rabbit trail of looking up what's a fruit and what's not a fruit with my adult son the other day, and we had a vote. So AI can, you can learn a lot.

NATALIE: Well, we could, we're going to save that for a different podcast.

DIANA: Okay. Okay.

NATALIE: Okay. Okay, so what AI said was, in summing it all up, is they said, Gaslighting is a psychological manipulation tactic that involves making someone question their reality, memories, or sanity. It's a form of emotional and psychological abuse. That can be intentional or unintentional. I thought that was interesting.

So how it works, the abuser tries to make the victim question their own beliefs, values, and behaviors. The abuser may deny facts, the situation or the victim's feelings. The abuser may try to make the victim feel embarrassed, bewildered, or confused. They, and the, the abuser may try to make the victim doubt their own perceptions and judgments.

Why is it harmful? Because it can cause victims to feel exhausted, confused, anxious, and isolated. And it can impact the victim's self esteem, mental health, and functioning. And it can make the victim dependent on the abuser. So some examples of gaslighting would be withholding information, questioning the victim's memory, changing the subject, minimizing the victim's feelings, And lying or denying something.

How to cope? Keep a journal of what happened, including the date and the time. So, so important. As you collect your little stories, you will be absolutely shocked when you look back over a couple of years, and all of a sudden, it will smack you between the eyes. And then secondly, talk to someone about what you're experiencing.

Loop someone else in so that you're not the only one with eyeballs on your situation. Alright, I'm going to open it up to you now. Let you, let you give your thoughts and ideas about what I just said, and also maybe what you thought, or what you think gaslighting is, and Springboard off of that.

DIANA: All right, great. Well, I think one thing to point out is that within gaslighting, it's like gaslighting is a way to categorize several different kinds of abuse tactics. And so like projection and blaming and all these other kinds of abuse tactics can fall under the umbrella of gaslighting as long as it's in some way trying to get you to doubt your reality.

and perception. So it's not like gaslighting is a tactic within itself. It's in some ways, it's like a category. Yeah. Yeah. Really interesting that you said it could be unintentional, but that makes sense because just because someone's emotionally abusive doesn't mean every single time they use a tactic, they're doing it intentionally.

It's a lot of times just the way Their brain, this is the pattern that their brain is in. It's the pathology of what their brain does in different situations for all sorts of different reasons. In a way it's their survival technique, super unhealthy and doesn't care. It lacks empathy. Their survival technique lacks.

Uh, yeah, technique or a way they're doing it is lacking empathy. So they really don't care what happens to the person on the other end. So I thought this topic of, you know, can you self gaslight was really interesting because, and I've been thinking about this for a couple of years, actually, Natalie, as I've heard people say all over the internet, I was gaslighting myself and I'm like, really, can you so far the way we've been talking about gaslighting.

And the original definition of it, it doesn't sound like something we do to ourselves because it sounds malicious and like it lacks care for the other person. So that's where I am so far. With what you've said, I think we're describing the abuse of it so far, where one person is doing it to a different person, and it's self serving and manipulative.

NATALIE: Yeah, I think that you hit on something, a nail on the head when you said it, it's, it shows a lack of care or empathy for the other person. But is it possible that my next question

would be You know, is it possible for us to kind of throw ourselves under the bus and not to care for ourselves again as a survival strategy in order to survive in a relationship or to be cared for by other people?

Because sometimes we get in these relationships or these, even these whole cultures or environments. where the only way that you're going to get care from other people or attention from other people or to be, you know, like, let's say you need to be driven to the doctor's office or you need, you know, we all need help from other people from time to time, but the only way you can get that, or even as a child, the only way you can get fed.

You know, or make sure you have a bed to sleep in at night, is if you throw yourself under the bus and deny your own needs in order to meet the needs of the person who's holding the power in their hands to either provide or not provide those things that you need.

DIANA: That seems like there's so many nuances and possibilities within that, like, um, you might know you have a need, but you deny yourself that need to make it through.

NATALIE: To meet other Another need, really.

DIANA: Yeah. And that's You're not purposely trying to dilute your need or excuse it or deny it. It's something you're choosing to do to navigate the situation. But you could also, in the process, dilute, dilute, dilute yourself, dilute your need.

You could dilute your need, uh And in that way, now, are we denying our own reality? And is that where we step into self gaslighting? I mean, do we want to define that yet? Because we could talk for hours and it could feel like we're going in circles with this. So I don't want to like overstep where we're going.

NATALIE: Yeah. Well, I don't really know where we're going. That's what I love about these conversations because we don't know exactly where it's going to go. But I think, uh, when it comes to gaslighting ourselves, we can bring a little bit of IFS theory in here because there's different parts of us that maybe know the truth on some level about some things.

I don't think we do as children. I don't think our brains are developed where we can actually have that much self awareness. But maybe as an adult, we can kind of be aware of one truth, but then on the other hand, we do have a part of ourself that is also aware of the consequences of actually leaning into that truth and doing something about it.

There could be severe consequences. I'm thinking of a past relationship that I had, I knew on some level, and it was true, but I knew on some level that if I was to call out my husband on what he was doing that I was going to get kicked out of my church, then. That people would actually turn on me and blame me for all of the problems.

How did I know that? Well, I knew that because my mom did that. My husband did that for many years. That's all I knew. I knew that I wasn't allowed to speak my needs or to speak my mind without getting into big, huge trouble for it. And so I gaslit myself. This is how I would say it. I gaslit myself by going into denial, basically a denial of what was going on, in order to, you know, avoid those kinds of consequences that seems to be overwhelming.

DIANA: Lessen the severity of your reality. Make excuses for it. Okay. So I. Because I've had this, like I said, this debate in my head, and I've even called people out on it, and I'm like, let me just say, my opinion is that you can't gaslight yourself. And so I thought, for sure, when I searched the internet, to see if self gaslighting was a thing that I, I convinced myself that the experts were going to say, you can't gaslight yourself.

Gaslighting is what one person does to manipulate another. But that is not what I found. I found that self gaslighting is something widely accepted, not just in culture, but by experts. And they're talking about it and so they're agreeing it's a thing. But I want to say I see it as very different from the gaslighting that we first defined.

So it's not being done to abuse yourself. It's usually not deliberate, and it's not an attempt to mess with someone else's life. It's more about creating self doubt and invalidation within yourself so that you can navigate and survive things that are painful or difficult. It's not self abuse.

It's survival. So where gaslighting traditionally is an abuse tactic towards someone else, it's not self abuse, it's survival.

NATALIE: Yeah, and I would even say that it's not always intentional, like, conscious survival. Like, we don't always consciously go, Well, I know that I think that these things are happening to me and they're really bad, but I'm just gonna pretend that they're not happening so that I don't have to... We're not consciously thinking that.

I think that many of us, especially who grew up in families where there was a lot of gaslighting going on in the family, we, have been programmed to do that. It's our programming. So, in other words, it's our knee jerk internal reaction to someone else mistreating us is to deny it. It's like a protective, uh, self protection strategy that we're not even aware of.

It's like a subconscious, you know, below our level of consciousness. We're not even aware of that we're doing it, which makes it even harder to root it out and look at it. Really, you have to be willing to go, what inside of me has been programmed to think that this is okay to do this or that has programmed to think that this is actually better to do this.

And then like you and I as coaches, and I would say that we've probably both done this where, where someone comes to the table and they are aware of it. And they say, I don't want to do this to myself anymore. Now what? So what would you say to someone like that? You know, I don't want to gaslight myself anymore. What do I do to stop? Like, I don't want to have these

habits anymore. I don't want to be hooked in anymore into these other voices and into this past programming from my parents or my whatever. How do I unhook from that so I'm not doing that anymore to myself?

DIANA: I would say it's definitely a learning process over time. I want to give a definition. I want to answer that first, like, just to see if I can concisely wrap up what you said about this idea of self gaslighting. I found these two different sentences online, and they are that self gaslighting in an emotionally abusive relationship is an unconscious coping mechanism to minimize conflict.

And the other one, a way to protect yourself emotionally or make sense of the abuse. So if we're not going to do that anymore, the reason we know we don't want to do that anymore is because this unconscious coping mechanism has become conscious because we've learned things. And, and we have more truth.

So I'd say we got to keep moving into true. If you're going to move away from, um, basically creating delusion or lies about your. Uh, and I don't say delusion in a crazy way, just delusion like, um...

NATALIE: Magical thinking. Hopeful thinking.

DIANA: It's just not quite on the truth. It's like, I'm just, Oh, pie in the sky or it's, um, I'm whatever we do, minimizing it, all that stuff. It's not quite on the truth. So if we're moving away from that, um, illusion or delusion, the way we're making ourselves think about it to survive, and we don't want to do that anymore, we've got to replace it with something else. What is it? Truth. We need more truth, but we still want to protect ourselves emotionally, and we still want to make sense of the abuse.

Now we've got to intentionally go out and find truth and healthy coping mechanisms that keep us in truth. And that, that is, that's hard. Especially if we're used to, if we've been doing this unconsciously, this means it's the well worn pathways in our brain. When X happens, I do B. That's how I survive. And our brain just does it.

Now we want to do something different. We have to use a lot of cognitive energy. And I, what do we do? I, there's so many things we could do. I mean, of course, join the Fine Free Kaleidoscope and bathe yourself in truth. And, and get Natalie's books and get other books. And things that, and watch YouTube and do things where people are speaking truth about this. And it can be hard. But we've got to let that in if we want to change.

NATALIE: Yeah. I think why people shy away from that, especially initially, is because when you wake up to the truth and you finally go, Oh my gosh, I think I need to, like, believe the truth about this, then you're faced with, now what am I going to do about that?

Now, that's a very uncomfortable because now you can't stay, you can't stay the same. You have to, now things are going to change for you. And we do not like to change things. It is so

terrifying to think about changing something in our lives. And also because we've maybe, I think a lot of Christian women especially have been kind of taught that we really.

Aren't the author of our destiny. Um, you know, I mean, God is for sure. We're taught that, but we're also kind of taught that our authorities sort of guide and direct us. We put ourselves under authorities and then they're the ones that kind of guide and direct us. And so we don't really have. As much thing, there's not as much thinking in our programming as Christian women, that we have autonomy or agency to make good choices.

And if someone just hands us on a silver platter, Oh, you look at this thing that's going on in your life. Now you have to do something about it and you get to make all the choices. Oh my gosh, that is absolutely terrifying. Because what do you make another mistake?

DIANA: You're coming from a place where you feel devastated because when you're realizing the truth. of what's been going on, that is a, it feels like a really big, heavy burden and so much to cope with and bear and understand. And we can't stay in it anymore because it's like, you know, the curtain lifted, the veil lifted. Now we see everything and we're like, It's overwhelming as well. So, yeah.

NATALIE: Yeah. You see the wizard behind the curtain. It's like, Oh, darn. Now I'm always going to see that little old man just pulling strings. Ew. What am I going to do? I have no more respect for that wizard.

DIANA: And I can't, now that I've seen truth, I can't gaslight myself anymore.

NATALIE: Yeah. Yes. Yeah. Well, I mean you you'd have to be really intent then you'd have to be consciously doing it You have to make a conscious choice, to, I know this is true, but I'm just going to go back to being the way I thought before. I think there actually is some of that sometimes.

DIANA: I'm sure I've done that many times.

NATALIE: Yeah. And it's not like we, well, yeah, I think sometimes we actually just do that because we just think, well, even with coaching, sometimes I think we can, especially those of us who've been trained coaches, we know that you can actually use cognitive behavioral therapy to gaslight yourself if you want to.

DIANA: Yes you can.

NATALIE: It's a tactic that, it's a stor, it's a tool in your toolkit that you can use, just like a hammer to either hammer a nail in the board or to, you know, knock your brains out.

DIANA: Now I do wanna say what I showed you. I had on my piece of paper, I had this note written down from a coaching call I did, did yesterday, which it just says the cherry on top of the

poop pile. Where we can use a brand new thought to be like, the poop pile is, I've been, things have been projected on me, I've been blamed, everything's on my shoulders, it's always my fault.

And then we're like, let's put a cherry on top of it. He's under a lot of stress and doing his best. I'm just going to keep loving him. It's my cherry on top of the poop pile. And so I really think that thought so hard. So that everything can be nice and rosy. But that's, so that's my self gaslighting so I can stay there.

But it's not really changing anything that's happening.

NATALIE: Yeah. Yes. Yeah. Okay. Oh good. I'm glad you said that.

DIANA: I can further answer your question a little bit. I have some notes here because I, I went down the rabbit trail looking stuff up about self gaslighting. And so if we want to move away from the self gaslighting, maybe we want to identify a little bit of the things that we do as self gaslighting.

The first one I had on the list was that we minimize the abuse, and that's kind of like that cherry on top that I just said. It's like, it's not that bad. They're just stressed. And so we do that as a way to avoid the reality of, of the abuse.

We're minimizing it. It's not that bad. Which I think everyone listening to this podcast is probably done. So if we want to move out of the self gaslighting and we want truth, We have to face just how bad it actually is. It is bad. This is, this is actually bad. There's actually bad things happening here.

There's actually a bad situation. There's actually a lot of unhealthy stuff happening here. I'm gonna say the truth in my head or out loud or in my journal, or to a therapist or a coach. I, the truth is, yeah, it is bad. What do you think about that?

NATALIE: Yeah, I think that's really important to say it out loud and also to say specifically what's bad about it. Like, why is it bad? You know, because otherwise we think, well, it's not that bad. It's, but what's really bad about it? What's the impact on your life to deal with this in your relationship?

DIANA: Yeah, it's bad because I can't sleep at night. It's bad because I'm stressed out. It's bad because I feel sick to my stomach every day. It's bad because my kids are witnessing this and thinking it's normal. It's bad because I'm too exhausted to go out with my friends. It's bad because I can't make sense of things and I feel like I'm going crazy half the time. It's bad because. And it's bad because a person shouldn't be allowed to treat someone that way.

That's not good for that person to get away with all this maltreatment.

NATALIE: Seriously.

DIANA: It's bad.

NATALIE: They're not growing, they're not maturing either. If they, if they're enabled to, and they're not confronted with the fact that we don't, we don't do that in polite society. Maybe in kindergarten we do that, but not, not as adults. Okay. Go ahead.

DIANA: Right. Not as adults. Okay. Um, the next one we do to self gaslight is we blame ourselves. If I could just do this better, they wouldn't act that way. If I would just X, Y, Z, they wouldn't act that way. If we would have sex more, they wouldn't act that way. If I'd keep the house cleaner, they wouldn't act that way.

If I would just not bring up that topic, they wouldn't act that way. And we do this, uh, to, it's, it's in some ways it gives us a little bit of control where something is out of control. We can't control the other person, but if I could just X, Y, Z, then that person would, and not controlling in a bad way, but we're trying to remember self gaslighting in an emotionally abusive situation is a survival technique. But, but if we don't want to do that anymore, then we have to not blame ourselves when we didn't do anything bad.

NATALIE: One thing I noticed in my first relationship is I would get angry, but I would deny that anger because if I dared to get angry or indignant about some of the unfairness and the injustice that was going on, then that would make the abuse worse.

And I would get attacked for that. So I wasn't allowed to have any feelings of indignation or anger over injustice. And that's kind of a, you know, I learned that when I was a kid, too. Not allowed. That's rude. That's not ladylike. It's not loving. It's not forgiving. And yet, if you're an abuse survivor and you're enduring those kinds of things every day, you're angry inside on some level, you might not even be aware of it, but on some level, some part of you is angry about that and it's coming out, whether you realize it or not, just to be able to, it was so freeing to me to just be able to go, I am so angry about this and it's okay for me to be angry about this.

DIANA: Yeah, actually that was the next one I had was invalidating your own emotions is a self gaslight. Yeah, it's that same thing. Um, and a lot of people I've, we've seen this in the Flying Free Kaleidoscope. I've, you've seen it more than me because you're in their way more than I am, but it seems so common once people are kind of moving out of this denial stage and moving into truth, suddenly they're like, why am I so angry? And that's because you're denied that anger that's been there all along. And it's that beach ball you've been holding under the water for a decade or two. And it is finally, you're not holding it down anymore. You're letting truth come out. Well, that's part of it. A whole lot of anger.

NATALIE: Yes. I've been reading a lot of books about processing emotions lately and when you are angry, underneath that is also extreme sadness and pain. And, um, and we are, sometimes the anger is on top because it gives us more energy and it helps us to not have to go deeper

down and experience that desperate, aching pain inside. I'm talking about like howling pain where you just want to howl because it hurts so bad. And a lot of times we don't go there because we think if we go there, we're not going to ever pull out again, but actually that is where the healing begins is going down into that pain and, and experiencing that and crying and let your body shaking it out.

How will, if you need to, um, it's amazing how, when you're done, it's like the end of a storm. You know, like the, you know, after a storm, how quiet it is. You might hear a few little birds twittering. It usually feels kind of fresh and a little bit lighter. The air feels lighter. And it feels, uh, there's just something different.

It's like a shift has taken place in the atmosphere. It actually feels like that in your body when you allow yourself to process pain. And that's not the only time the storm comes through either. Like, don't think, Oh, well, I did my processing. Now I should be good. No, depending on how long, how many years you went through that and how deep and dark it is, you're going to have to, it's going to be lots of storms to metabolize all of that trauma in your body over time.

DIANA: Here in the midwest we get scattered thunderstorms. Yeah, it's like that.

NATALIE: Exactly, exactly. Or sometimes they'll come in, they'll roll in one after the other. You're like, Oh. Wait a minute, I thought we were done with this, but no, it's another one.

DIANA: Yeah. I have another one on the list. Might as well jump into it. A way to self gaslight ourselves. So if this is a way we self gaslight and we want to move out of it, we'll have to change this, but we rationalize the toxic behavior. It's kind of like minimizing the abuse, but it's rationalizing. They, they only yelled because they care about me. They only, um, can't attach in a healthy way to me because.

They were abused when they were a child. They only get upset in the evenings because their job is so stressful. I'm going to, you know, they have toxic, toxic behavior, but it all makes sense. And it's a way to justify. We're justifying their abuse. And it protects the relationship because you don't have to face it. If you can rationalize it, you don't have to do anything different.

NATALIE: And that, that's the thing we do. We do want to protect the relationship if you don't, because if you're, if you don't, what does that mean for you that you're going to lose this relationship? It's not just a relationship. This means you might lose your church.

It means you might lose your children. It means you might lose your home. It means you might lose your financial security. It means you might lose your life. Not literally, but although for some people it does actually mean that. But it's more than just a relationship. It's your whole entire life that's wrapped up in this relationship.

So again, very terrifying situation and a good reason to gaslight yourself. I mean, we might as well just say it. There's lots of good reasons to gaslight ourselves. There are.

DIANA: Oh, I never think I would never tell someone don't gaslight yourself. You need to get out of this right now. I'm like, you know, it really makes sense.

It really makes sense that you're minimizing the abuse or taking on some of the blame or rationalizing it. Of course. It totally makes sense. I have no judgment for anyone ever doing it. I did it for decades and I'm sure I still do it in some places of my life that I'm not even realizing I'm doing it.

Though I have a lot less toxic relationships in my life now, thankfully. But I guess, what does that mean? If we're not going to self gaslight here, does that mean, well, it means we're no longer going to justify the abuse. That behavior is unacceptable. And there's just no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

That's the way it is. But then I wonder about if it feels like the relationship's not going to be protected. If we don't rationalize it, and that the relation, like, you have to face. If I can't justify their reason to treat me so poorly, now what? And that's scary. Like you said, everything can shift.

NATALIE: Yeah, I think it's important too to say here that it is scary. I think everyone needs to understand that just because you wake up to the abuse and face the truth doesn't always mean you have to make a decision about anything right away, or even in a few years. I always describe it like having a baby.

You're having contract, you know, the baby's going to come eventually, right? But the, but, but you have Braxton Hicks contractions sometimes for months before it actually comes. And then the contractions get closer and closer together. A contraction would be like, Oh, is this it? Is this the end of the relationship?

Is this going to be it? Am I going to jump off the cliff? Nope, this is not it yet, not quite yet, and you might try some other things and we try, we try different strategies to save it in hopes that the other person might change their behavior or meet us halfway or whatever, we make those bids for connection and then eventually, um, if they are truly not going to be 100 percent in the relationship with you.

Eventually, you know, most of us will just decide, I'm not, I guess I'm not going to be in this relationship either. And we either physically separate or divorce, or we mentally and emotionally separate, and maybe we don't get divorced, but we definitely. Our, we have left, we've exited the relationship, even though we're still in it.

And a lot of people live like that. I think that's more authentic. If you are worried about, well, am I gaslighting myself? I think it's more authentic at least to live by saying, yeah, this relationship is not healthy. These are the honest ways that I don't appreciate how he's showing up in the relationship.

And I'm going to stay for these reasons. I like these reasons that I'm going to stay. And I'm always going to leave the door open to leaving if the opportunity comes or if I ever feel like I need to for my own safety or for the safety of my children. I think that's perfectly valid and I would not say that that's gaslighting.

I would say at that point we're leaning into the truth and we're making conscious choices about what we're going to do with that truth.

DIANA: Yeah, once again, truth is what we replace self gaslighting with. It sounds like.

NATALIE: Do the one more and then I think we're going to end this episode. And we'll do, we're going to make this a double header and the next episode we will actually get into some of the comments that people made so that you can hear other people just like you. Uh, it's all anonymous. You won't, you, you won't be able to identify any of them. So if you're an abuser out there listening and you're hoping that you'll hear your wife, you won't. So just go away.

But anyway, we're going to come back and we're going to, and we're going to hear from our butterflies, but go ahead.

DIANA: Okay, so the last one, and it kind of overlaps, but I think this is a good one to end with. The last way we self gaslight, there's more, but the last one I have here on how we self gaslight is questioning our own perceptions.

Maybe I remembered that wrong. And a lot of times in abuse, you know, not just a day goes by. It could be 10 minutes goes by. And then our perception is all mixed up. We're like, did he really call me a swear word? He said he didn't. It only happened 10 minutes ago. Did I hear him wrong? Maybe I got this wrong.

And we spend so much time questioning our own perception. So to move out of self gaslighting, I propose we stop second guessing our perceptions. And we start trusting ourselves. I know we're not going to be foolproof. It's not like I'm right every time. But it's gotta be more than what, you know, if, if they're gaslighting gaslighting ourselves, we're starting to think, I just have no memory.

I have no clue what's going on. I am lost here. We want to get back to, no, I heard what you said and I'm sticking to it. Or I know what happened yesterday. And if we need to, one of the strategies we can use, because it can be very foggy in these kind of situations, is to write things down. If you walk out of a room when something weird just happened and you're feeling confused, go write down everything you remember and start and be like, no, I heard him say whatever.

So I'm not going to wake up tomorrow and think if he, you know, he's tried to confuse me out of this. I never said that. I don't know what you're talking about. Nope. I wrote it down. I trust me.

That would be the way out of this.

NATALIE: Yep. That's good. That's good advice to end on. All right, you guys, if you are interested in joining the Flying Free Kaleidoscope, it's super easy. Just go to joinflyingfree.com. And check it out. We make it super affordable. Anybody can afford it. Just about anyone can afford it. And, and we would love to have you in there. All right. Thanks Diana. We'll see you next week.

DIANA: See you next time.