

## WHAT IS GASLIGHTING IN A TOXIC NARCISSISTIC RELATIONSHIP?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [FlyingFreeNow.com](http://FlyingFreeNow.com), and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.*

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 92 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have with me Amy Marlow-MaCoy. She is a licensed professional counselor and author of "The Gaslighting Recovery Workbook." Welcome, Amy, to the Flying Free Podcast.

AMY: Thanks, Natalie. I'm so happy to be here today.

NATALIE: I'm excited to ask you some questions about gaslighting, because I think everyone listening to this podcast has experienced gaslighting one or five million times in their life. In case there is someone tuning in who has never heard the word "gaslighting" before, can you tell us what that is? Also, can you show us some examples of how it might show up in a family system?

AMY: Sure. Gaslighting is a term for a specific type of mental and emotional abuse in which one person tries to make the other person doubt their sanity, their experiences, their thoughts, or their feelings. The phrase came from a play written back in the 1930s called "The Gaslight." They have also made it into two different movie versions, the more famous of which starred Ingrid Bergman.

In that movie there is a husband and wife couple. The husband is out to steal the wife's diamonds. While he is rooting around looking for them, he keeps dimming the gaslights in the house. When the wife asks what is up with the gaslights, he tells her she is going crazy, there's nothing wrong with the lights, and that she is making it up. That is obviously a very overt form of gaslighting where you tell the other person they are crazy and deny their experiences.

But gaslighting can also show up in a more subtle way. Some ways I see it show up a lot in relationships with family members or loved ones would be making someone feel guilty when they've done nothing wrong; implying they have wounded you by standing up for themselves or having their own opinions; treating you as if you are overreacting for having an emotional response to something; being blamed and shamed for being your own person or doing anything the gaslighter doesn't approve of; or retaliating for even the most minor incident, slight, or offense. A gaslighter may go scorched earth to punish you for doing something they don't approve of.

NATALIE: So these all sound like emotional abuse.

AMY: Yes, it is emotional abuse, and gaslighting is a niche within the emotional abuse wheelhouse.

NATALIE: Can you talk about who might be susceptible to being gaslit?

AMY: It is interesting. We often think of people susceptible to gaslighting as being people who have no sense of self or no assertiveness. Gaslighters can absolutely target people who do struggle with assertiveness because they are kind of easy. They don't have a lot of confidence to begin with, and it is easy for someone to come in and undermine what confidence they do have.

There is also another set of people vulnerable to gaslighting, and those are folks who do have a good amount of self-confidence, because some gaslighters can look at them and see a target or a conquest. They can say, "I don't really like that they are that proud of themselves or feel that good about themselves. I would rather take them down a peg." They will start undermining that foundation of self confidence by making the person question themselves or doubt themselves.

NATALIE: Interesting and good to know, because I know a lot of the women I work with are very strong, intelligent powerhouses. Yet they have lived with this crazy feeling and are constantly second-guessing themselves, wondering if they misunderstood what the person said or really did experience it differently. They are super confused. They are badass in every other area of their life, but then they go home and are utterly baffled.

AMY: Yes, it is so confusing and so frustrating to feel like, "I've got all these other areas of my life together. Why can't I figure this out? Am I lying to myself about everything?" That's the power of gaslighting. If someone can make you question yourself in one area, it tends to have a ripple effect, and you will question yourself in everything.

NATALIE: When I think about that movie you brought up at the beginning, toward the end she completely falls apart. I've watched this happen to women. By the time they get to me, they have already completely fallen apart and they don't know what to do with themselves anymore. What does that look like? Tell us more about the symptoms that women might experience if they are living with someone who is regularly doing this to them.

AMY: Some common signs and side effects I see with my clients are an overall loss of confidence. They will feel like they just don't trust themselves. They will feel like they

need to get a lot of external validation for whatever feelings they have. That might look like telling the same story to six different people to ask, "Am I crazy for feeling this way? What would you do in this situation? Would that bother you? Am I overreacting?" They have lost trust in their own instincts and their own intuition.

Often it can lead to general anxiety because if you can't trust your own thoughts, you can't trust yourself in any way. It's a lot harder to trust anything else in the world. People frequently become overly apologetic, apologizing for things they need not apologize for such as having emotions, having an opinion, having a different opinion than someone else, feeling like they are imposing when they aren't, sensing "I'm wrong; I'm a mess; I can't think straight." All those gaslighting side effects can make you feel you are in the way no matter what you do and can cause you to apologize a lot. I also see a lot of overthinking and what I call "analysis paralysis," where you cannot make a decision to save your life because you are so afraid it is going to be wrong or you are going to get backlash for it.

NATALIE: This completely parallels the experiences of the women I work with. One of the interesting nuances to a lot of these women is that they are also in religious communities that contribute, I think, to the gaslighting. These women go outside of their home to get some outside perspective and say, "I think there is something wrong here. I don't know what it is." They try to get some help, but I think they are gaslit again by the people outside of the home. Can you talk about, I think you used the term "flying monkey" in your book? Can you talk about how they contribute to the problem?

AMY: I agree wholeheartedly. I think that's one of the biggest shames. Religious communities can, intentionally or not, perpetrate this form of abuse on their members. I know a lot of religious communities have very particular beliefs, expectations, and thoughts about things like gender, men and women's roles, and how men and women should behave. But when abuse is happening, often the church doesn't know how to handle that, and it can lead to them inadvertently causing even more pain or contributing to the abuse by becoming a flying monkey for the abuser.

"Flying monkey" – that term was lifted from the movie "The Wizard of Oz," which I think most of us are probably familiar with. In the movie, the Wicked Witch of the West sends her flying monkeys to go get Dorothy at some point because Dorothy has not come to her. She wants those shoes, so she sends the monkeys to go get her and bring Dorothy to her. In a relationship, a flying monkey would be someone who goes and acts on behalf of the abusive person or the controlling person.

In a family setting, let's say your mother or father is controlling or emotionally abusive.

You finally reach the point where you say, "I can't do this anymore. I love my parents, but I can't be around them because they hurt me so much." So you decide you are going to sit out a family gathering or holiday and are going to take a break. The next thing you know your brother is on the phone saying, "Look, you just have to understand. This is just how mom is. Dad doesn't mean it. This is just what he does. You need to develop a thicker skin and let it roll off. You can't be bothered by this."

That is your brother being a flying monkey. He's trying to pull you back into the family where you have filled a particular role. You've accepted a lot of abuse. You've put up with a lot of pain, and he's making excuses on behalf of the people who are not changing their harmful behavior. That is how someone might act as a flying monkey.

NATALIE: That is so painful! It is so painful for people to go through abuse in the first place, but then to have other people come in and just perpetuate the same cycle on them or try to pull them back into it as if their life is not worth being free of abuse... It's sort of soul murder in a lot of ways. It's like, "You must be the person who goes through this because we all say that you should be, and this is how we keep this system working. So get back in your place."

AMY: Yes, those "get in line" messages. Oh my gosh, they are heartbreaking.

NATALIE: What I really want to get to is how to help women who are thinking, "This is my life and I don't know what to do." There's two things I want to look at. I think they want help with how they deal with the other person, either the person who is gaslighting them or the flying monkeys. Also, how do they deal with all that internal drama they have going on as a result? You can even call it PTSD. As a result of everything that has happened to them, how do they help themselves?

AMY: I'm going to answer your questions in reverse order, because I hear this question so often. "How do I make it stop? How do I make them leave me alone? How do I make them respect that my 'no' means 'no' or that my feelings are valid?" The first thing you have to do before you can set those boundaries is that you have to be able to listen to yourself. You must be able to credit your own experience and see it as valid, regardless of what anyone else says.

That begins with self-compassion and self-acceptance. If you don't have those things, if you can't look at your own heart and say, "What I feel matters; I'm an important person; I have value in the world; I have worth," then you aren't going to be able to set those boundaries. If you don't believe you have worth, it is going to be very hard to convince anyone else that you do. It begins with recognizing you are someone who matters. Your

soul matters in the universe. Then allow that to fill you up so you can say, "It's not okay to step on me. I matter too. My time and my feelings matter too, and this is not okay with me."

NATALIE: But what if they just come back... Because they are living in their pretend world where they get to define you, they get to say you're standing up and saying you are someone different from how they are defining you. They will come back and say, "That's not true. Who do you think you are? You're so screwed up in your head. You're making all of this up." So then what?

AMY: Then you need to come up with some responses that you can have prepared ahead of time. I encourage you to think of what I call "rinse and repeat" answers so you don't have to be trying to figure this out on the fly when you are feeling flustered and stressed. If someone says, "You're making this up," or "You're exaggerating," or "You're overreacting," you can come up with a simple phrase that you can repeat ad nauseam, something like, "I'm entitled to my feelings and nobody gets to tell me they are wrong," or "I feel how I feel. You don't have to agree with it," or "If you continue to tell me my feelings are not right or not real, I will end this conversation."

NATALIE: You know what I love about this? At least from my experience, I kept thinking if one answer didn't work then I had to come up with something else, and maybe that would get through to him. I was constantly pulled into these arguments where I was trying to, on the fly, come up with all these reasons, and he always had a comeback. But it's interesting because his comebacks (or the comebacks of other people in my life) were always the same, yet I somehow felt like I had to come up with creative responses.

But I love what you're saying. What you're saying is just say the same thing over and over again because that's the truth. That's where you draw the line. "This is the line that I've drawn. I will not go past this line. If you keep coming up and knocking on this wall, you're going to get the same answer from me every single time."

AMY: Yes. For those of your listeners who are of the Christian faith, I admit that I do not remember where this is, but I know it is in one of the Gospels. There is a place where Jesus says, "Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.'" You don't have to justify, defend, explain, or rationalize. If you say, "yes," say "yes." If you say, "no," say "no." If this is okay with you, then cool, and if it's not, then cool. Say, "no." It's okay.

NATALIE: I love that. Do you have any other examples? I really liked that. If I were listening I would think, "Give me more examples of what I can say back." I should be a gaslighter right now and then engage you. "I didn't say that. What are you talking

about? I never said that." What would you say?

AMY: That's one of the most common ones, and it drives me nuts! I hate it when people do that. But yes, you're right. It does happen a lot. In that case you can say, "I'm sorry you see it differently," or "I remember that differently. We have different experiences."

NATALIE: And that's okay. For me, I just assumed that everyone else was telling the truth and that their perspective was almost more valid than mine was. I grew up thinking that instead of realizing that their perspective was valid and my perspective was equally valid. I don't have to throw myself and my perspective under the bus and buy into everyone else's perspective. I can listen to what they are saying and decide about whether I want to buy into that story.

AMY: Exactly. What you were just saying reminded me of a specific example where unintentional, or not nefarious, gaslighting can occur, particularly within religious communities where often women especially are taught to be subservient, to be caring for everyone, and to put themselves last. A concrete example has, for whatever reason, always stayed with me. I remember when I was growing up we had a little sign in our house. It said, "The definition of joy is putting things in the right order: Jesus, others, you."

NATALIE: Yes!

AMY: The message was that you should always put yourself last and it was selfish to do anything else. I'm sure that the intention was not to make us feel like we could never put ourselves in the driver's seat or that we didn't matter. But the message that came from that was very much that you could not be in the lead. You always had to come last. That is devastatingly harmful.

NATALIE: It is. I'm so glad you said that. There's a little ditty we used to sing in Sunday School (which I won't sing here in the podcast), but I know a lot of you women know what I'm talking about. That little ditty, "J-O-Y, this is what it means," that little song. It's interesting, because as adults we can say, "I'm sure that's not what that means." But when you are a child, your brain is objectively recording all this information and then turning it into programming that you live your life by. That's how it happens. It can be as innocent as a children's Sunday School song.

Now suddenly you are living your entire adult life as if that is reality. It's not. It's unhealthy. It's not true. It's not what the writer of the Sunday School song meant to communicate, and yet that is the result in a hundred thousand women's lives who have

faith in God, who read the Bible, and who want to live their lives to please God. They truly believe they can only please God if they are regularly throwing themselves under the bus, taking care of other people at their own expense. That's not to say that we don't take care of other people or help other people at all. It's just that we do that on fumes. By the time we get in our fifties we're doing it on fumes, and we have nothing left to give because we've completely depleted ourselves.

AMY: There's something else I've noticed in some church communities. It seems to vary depending on the church denomination and the dynamics within a particular religious community. Unfortunately, there are some dynamics that seem to pull in people who enjoy wielding power over others and then misuse it.

One thing I've seen show up before... We were talking about those simple childhood messages of putting others first, not being selfish, and thinking of others before we think of ourselves. One area I've seen gaslighting show up in the church community is that sometimes those simple childhood messages become dogma to where if you question anything, if you try to develop adult thinking or adult nuance to some of these questions... Like, "What does it mean to give without completely depleting yourself? Is it possible to care for others without having to destroy yourself in the process? Are there some of these teachings that have become problematic over time or are no longer helpful or are actively harming someone?"

Unfortunately, church leadership may gaslight congregants that ask those questions, may question their faith, or say, "You're misinterpreting that," or "You are weak in your faith if you don't want to be selfless." I've seen some real damage done and some genuine pain caused to congregants who have wonderful, giving hearts. They say, "I am giving to the point where I am running on empty, and then I am told I'm being selfish to say I can't do this anymore."

NATALIE: Yeah. That's another great example that many people can relate to. Can you tell us a little about your workbook and why...? I guess this whole podcast explains why you wrote it, right? You wanted to help people who were dealing with this. Were you seeing a lot of people in your practice who were struggling with this issue?

AMY: Yes, absolutely. My practice is almost entirely made up of people who have experienced emotional abuse, often within their families and often from a narcissistic loved one or an emotionally immature loved one. I've also worked with many clients who've experienced pain from their spiritual or religious family, some of them with the same kinds of gaslighting we just talked about with the simplified childhood messages or that it's not okay to question anything. I wrote this workbook with these clients in

mind so they would have a resource to help them combat some of this problematic thinking and so they could regain their sense of self.

NATALIE: I'm holding your workbook in my hands right now. It's excellent! I highly recommend it if you are struggling with this or are living with someone who is doing this to you regularly. This workbook will help you get your power back. I think it's incredible! Can you tell us how you set your workbook up, and what are some ways that it will help these listeners?

AMY: The workbook is divided into three sections. The first section goes into detail explaining what gaslighting is, why people gaslight other people, who has been victimized by it, and how it affects us. The second section goes into looking at specific scenarios, how it hurts you, and how you can begin to heal from it. There are about fifteen to twenty exercises per chapter to help you go through and look at your own life and identify how gaslighting has shown up in your life. The third section is devoted to helping you to heal, to develop self-compassion, to forgive yourself, and to reclaim your sense of autonomy and power.

NATALIE: I love that. I think as you work through this workbook you may be surprised at some things that come up where you think, "Oh. I thought that was normal. I mean, I didn't think it was normal, but I didn't realize it had a name or that it could be identified as a pathological behavior that was having such a tremendous negative affect in my life."

But it is so important that you have those lightbulb moments because you can't fight a problem you aren't aware is happening or that you aren't aware is happening to the degree that it is. If you go into battle thinking you will fight against one other person in hand combat but when you go into battle you find out you are fighting fifty people who are all pointing guns at you, those are two totally different battles. You want to know what battle you're in so you know how to fight that battle strategically.

AMY: Yes. I know for some folks who've experienced gaslighting, especially when it comes from someone that you love or trust, a family member, a partner, your religious community, fighting back feels so hard. It feels so wrong to fight. For those folks, I would encourage you to think about this as protecting yourself. This is not allowing yourself to be abused. It doesn't mean you have to hit someone back. It means you don't have to keep taking body blows anymore. You can say "No more."

NATALIE: I like to think of fighting in this scenario as not going after someone and attacking them in return for them attacking us. All we are doing is standing in our



reality, standing in our experience and our perceptions, and validating ourselves. That other person is going to say, "You're attacking me," simply because you choose to stand up and exist in the world. They're going to make that mean you're attacking them, but that is also gaslighting. They are gaslighting by saying you are attacking them when all you're doing is saying, "No, I saw it this way."

AMY: Yes. And there is actually a word for that specific way of doing gaslighting. Have you ever heard of the word, DARVO?

NATALIE: I have. Talk about that.

AMY: DARVO stands for "denial, accusation, reversing, victim, and offender." It's a specific type of gaslighting where if you assert yourself or say, "No, that's not how it was for me," they will accuse you of attacking them. The goal of that is to get you to back off, to say, "No, that's not what I meant. I guess you must be right. I didn't mean to attack you," so you will stop asserting yourself. I think it's important to know when that's happening if there is someone in your life who does that, because it can really flabbergast and fluster you if someone accuses you of attacking when all you are trying to do is reinforce your truth.

NATALIE: Right, which is why it is so critical for all of us to see ourselves as a separate person from them, and to get out of the heads of... We see ourselves through their eyes too much. All we are in their world is a Lego character in their little universe, and we see ourselves as they see us. They see us as a little Lego character, and then we see ourselves like that. And we're not! We're a separate person from them. They can totally DARVO us. They can do that. That's perfectly fine. But we don't have to make that mean anything about us. All it does is give us a little more information about them and their tactics of control and manipulation.

AMY: Yes. I talk about this a lot in the chapter of the book about boundaries, but I think it's important to know that just because someone does something doesn't mean you have to fall into the same pattern. In the same vein, setting a boundary with someone doesn't mean you are telling them, "You have to stop doing this," or "You can't be like that." What you're saying is, "You're an adult. You're another person. You can make your own choices. You have autonomy that way. And I have the choice not to engage in the same way that I have been. I can choose differently, and if you continue to do this, I probably will."

NATALIE: Yep. That is really the key, seeing yourself as an adult and letting the other person be an adult even if they are acting like a child. You're an adult, they're an adult.

You all get to make your own choices. I think that is empowering in and of itself.

AMY: Absolutely.

NATALIE: This has been a great interview. I appreciate you taking time out of your schedule to come and share this stuff with us. For those of you listening, in the show notes I will include links to her book on Amazon. Is that the main place they can get it?

AMY: Yes. You can buy it on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bookshop.org – you can even order it through Target.

NATALIE: Awesome! So many places to get this workbook. I'll also include links to her website and other things she offers so you can learn more about this problem, and most importantly the solutions that can help set you free from the gaslighting that is going on in your life. Thanks again, Amy, for being part of the Flying Free Podcast!

AMY: Thanks so much for having me, Natalie. I enjoyed our conversation.

NATALIE: For those listening, thanks for joining us. Until next time, fly free!