

# Robin Stern The Gaslight Effect

**robin stern:** It doesn't have to even be devastating for you to begin to lose your grip on the way you think about the world on what you know. And so one of the things that I would say to myself during those years is, what would I do if my daughter came to me and told me this story? Kind of instant reorientation. Is this relationship allowing me to stand in my integrity?

That was Robin Stern on Psychologists Off the Clock.

**Yael Schonbrun:** We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting-edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile High Denver, Colorado, author of Act Daily Journal, the Act Daily Card Deck, and the upcoming book Act for Burnout.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

**Jill Stoddard:** And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, The Big Book of ACT Metaphors, and the upcoming Imposter No More.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Jill Stoddard:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

I'm here with Debbie to introduce today's episode where I speak to Robin Stern about a topic that has gotten a lot of attention, I guess, popular culture lately.

And that is the topic of gaslighting. And Robin and I talk all about what gaslighting is and what it isn't, and who's vulnerable to it, um, and how to, to get away from it. So Debbie, what are your thoughts about this episode?

**Debbie Sorensen:** I have a lot of thoughts about this episode. I think for me it was helpful for exactly the reason you're talking about that it is a term that I hear a lot used in different capacities, and it helped me to just think a little bit

more deeply about what is it, what isn't it? And there were a few nuggets that I think I will really.

Keep with me. One is this idea that it's like a persistent pattern and just some things about different types of it, different, you know, flavors of gaslighting. And so again, I think sometimes these terms in psychology, they, they're kind of trendy, right? And they get used a lot and.

**Jill Stoddard:** Like overused.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Overused sometimes, I think sometimes it's gaslighting, in particular, is used for things that maybe aren't really, at least according to her definition.

Um, but then also they get so vague. And of course, this is a term that you could kind of define it. I mean, maybe different people define it differently, but to me, it's helpful to stop and think about, like, what are we talking about here really? And let's get a little bit more precise about the meaning of the word.

I found that really helpful.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, I agree.

**Debbie Sorensen:** And one thing I think, um, that's, that is sort of interesting is to think about this relationship between narcissism and gaslighting. And I think she talks about how people who are gaslighting, are not always going to be narcissistic, but that there is a lot of overlap there and so often it is.

And maybe that's on the more extreme end of things, but I've been sort of interested in this lately. We've done some past episodes on narcissism on the podcast. You can listen. One of the ones that was downloaded a lot when we released it quite a while ago. Was episode 98 on Narcissism and I've been reading a book recently that's called Stop Caretaking the Borderline or Narcissist: How to End the Drama and Get on with Life, which actually our former co-host Ray Littlewood recommended to me.

So thank you, Ray. It's been a pretty interesting read and there is a bit of overlap I think between this interview and this book on caretaking for people who are narcissistic, which is that sometimes we can lose our sense of self, right? I think when we're in a situation where gaslighting is happening, we can get confused and almost like our point of view merges with the other person and we end up kind of fuzzy on like, what do I want?

What do I need? Like where do my, where does my perspective begin and end? Because we get sort of enmeshed in this relationship in a way. Even someone who goes into the relationship with a pretty solid sense of themselves can kind of lose that a little bit. It's sort of interesting, I think, to think about that.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, I mean that really is kind of your red flag. That's like the warning that you are being gaslit. Right. Like if you are starting to question your sense of self, your sense of reality, and especially one of the things Robin talks about is, especially if it's only happening in the context of one specific relationship, but not across other domains, then that's like really a sign that you probably are being gas lit.

And one of the things she talks about is, you know how sometimes people who are more empathic or kind become more vulnerable to gaslighting. And I really get that.

You know, it's like you wanna understand that humans aren't all bad and maybe they're going through a hard time. And um, you know, it's like we almost give a little too much compassion or leeway to the person who's gaslighting, if that makes sense.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, and that was another thing that I think this episode, this conversation and that book on caretaking have in common is the idea that often the victim of it, the person who's being gaslit is a kind person whose really heart is in the right place. Often they might be able to stop and say, oh, I'm open to feedback.

I wanna hear what this other person has to say. I wanna take their point of view. That's actually a pretty good quality to have in general. It's usually someone who is empathic and kind.

**Jill Stoddard:** And if the opposite is a person who doesn't ever take responsibility for their role in things, that's problematic. Right? So, if you wanna be a self-aware person, who examines the role that you play in something, which is a good quality, but that exact thing can end up being weaponized against you by somebody who engages in gaslighting.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Right, and you gave actually an example in the episode from your marriage, and I can think of some examples in my life too, where it's like being open is good, right? To feedback and to listening to things. But then there is that slippery slope into like, always sacrificing your own needs or always taking the other person's point of view where you can end up, yeah,

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, it's like you have to go into it with your eyes wide open and understand that you may have values that you typically enact, right? Like I wanted to be open to my husband's feedback and that was beneficial to our relationship. But if I'm in a different context with a different person who's gaslighting, you know, to understand that you, it's not necessarily appropriate to be kind and compassionate across every single domain with every single person.

And really to have your eyes wide open. And that choice should really be deliberate and conscious, depending on the specific situation in person.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, and I remember

when I did that previous episode, episode 98 with Abby Lev and Robin Walzer, at that time I also did a training that they, they offered on this topic and that was one of the things that is so. Important. It's just observing it. Right? Just like taking a step back and being like, okay, let me take a look at what's going on here from this place of being a little bit more just able to see the pattern.

And I think that's probably the first step. And one of the most important things you can do is be like, okay, I see what's happening here. I understand what's going on. Cuz I think that keeps you from getting too caught up in it. Yeah,

**Jill Stoddard:** And you know what that makes me think of that's helped me in specific personal situations is when I'm able to look at the person I suspect is being a gas lighter and look at their other relationships who aren't me. And if I see that they're having interpersonal problems with a lot of different people, like I'm thinking about someone I know whose kids, you know, he went through a divorce and his kids are no longer talking to him, and you know, there's a bunch of data points that are like, oh, I'm not the only person having a problem with this person.

This seems to be a pattern in their life across numerous relationships. And that's like a data point, right? That like this isn't just about me being hard on someone.

**Debbie Sorensen:** That's right. Yeah.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Well, we hope you enjoy this episode with Robin Stern.

Hey everybody, it's Jill here and I'm excited to introduce my guest today.

This is Dr. Robin Stern, who has written about a topic that we've been hearing a lot about in recent times, which is gaslighting. So we will talk all about

gaslighting, what it is, where this term originated, and how you know if you're being gaslit. Dr. Robin Stern is the co-founder and senior advisor to the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and has 30 years of experience as a licensed psychoanalyst.

She is the author of two books, the Gaslight Effect, how to Spot and Survive, the Hidden Manipulation Others Use To Control Your Life, and The Gaslight Effect Recovery Guide, Your Personal Journey Toward Healing From Emotional Abuse. She also hosts the Gaslight Effect podcast. Robin, welcome to Psychologists Off the Clock.

**robin stern:** Thank you, Jill. I really appreciate being here and am excited to talk about gaslighting and of course, also the work at the Yale Center for Promotional Intelligence as it intersects with gaslighting.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yes, that would be great. Well, this term, I was so excited to talk to you because I feel like the popularity of this term, we just keep hearing this word gaslighting all the time. So I thought maybe we could start with the origin of that, that term for the people who don't know, where that came from.

And then maybe from there, your definition of gaslighting.

**robin stern:** Great. So thank you for the question and I'm happy to start at the beginning. So, in 1938, there was a play by Patrick Hamilton where a husband tried to drive his wife crazy by flickering the Gaslight. That Gaslight play was actually called Angel Street.

**Jill Stoddard:** I didn't know that part of the history.

**robin stern:** Yes. And then in 1944, it was made into a movie with, uh, Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boye, which is a movie I saw over and over. Part of my origin of Gaslight effect story. And many people have seen that movie over and over again, where a young, loving, naive woman falls in love with a diabolical, maniacal guy who becomes her gaslight and he is driven to steal her jewels that are hidden in her attic that he knows about. Because, he actually had murdered her aunt, who was the owner of those jewels. The audience knows that, and she does not know that, of course.

So over the course of the movie, and in fact in the very beginning, you see her go from a confident, lovely, feet-on-the-ground kind of woman in love with her husband, to someone second-guessing herself, who is kind of anxious. And the character, Ingrid Bergman plays Paula in the movie, becomes more and more

anxious, and becomes as at the manipulation at the hands of her husband, Gregory in the movie becomes the crazy person he has been telling her from the beginning she is.

**Jill Stoddard:** That she is.

**robin stern:** Yeah, and it was always fascinating to me that this woman and then people in my practice and people in my personal life were so confident and solid, feeling solid about themselves in their decisions in most of their lives. And yet in one relationship, Where they bought into the power of love and attraction and, relational connection.

They could just, with turn a phrase, begin to second guess themselves. It was fast. It is fascinating.

**Jill Stoddard:** You know, I've never actually seen the movie. I think I'm gonna have to put that on my list to actually see. I know the role of the movie and the history of this term, but you've described it in the most interesting way I've ever heard it described. And now I really wanna go see the movie.

**robin stern:** It really.

**Jill Stoddard:** it.

I'll have to see it in my house.

**robin stern:** And do you know, it's funny that you say that because every time I see the movie, I see something new. I remember teaching the movie, uh, teaching gaslighting and using the movie clip as an intro not long ago to a psychoanalytic group. And what I noticed for the first time really, was how foggy the beginning of the movie was.

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm.

**robin stern:** When you are gaslighted, when you're suffering the gaslight effect, that is the way your brain feels like you can't really see clearly anymore. And so I just love the fact that that, that the cinematographer, the director, made that happen. At the beginning it was, you know, the entrance into Gaslight.

**Jill Stoddard:** that. Yeah. That's really cool. Well, so I guess the movie sort of tells us pretty clearly what gaslighting is, but do you have sort of a, like

textbook definition that you use? If someone says to you, what is gaslighting Robin?

**robin stern:** I say a couple of things and I actually, I'm gonna just read the lines from my book. So, cause it is in the book, right?

**Jill Stoddard:** I asked for a textbook definition. You're gonna give me a textbook definition. I love it.

**robin stern:** Actually, there are two of them, right? And they join. So gaslighting is an insidious and sometimes covert form of emotional abuse repeated over time. Important where the abuser leads the target to question their judgments, the reality, and an extreme cases their own sanity. Gaslighting is a type of psychological manipulation.

In which the gaslight or the more powerful person in the relationship, because Jill, um, gaslighting turns around power in a relationship, the more powerful person in a relationship tries to convince you that you are misremembering, misunderstanding, misinterpreting your own behavior or motivations, thus creating doubt in your mind that leaves you vulnerable and confused.

**Jill Stoddard:** So you, added a couple words in there saying important about the piece that said a repeated pattern of this kind of behavior, and that stuck with me that you said that part's important because it made me think of another word that gets thrown around a lot is bullying, right?

But just because someone is mean to you one time does not make them a bully. If you look at the definition of bullying, one of the things that's important is that it is a pattern of behavior, a repeated pattern of behavior. So do you wanna talk about that? A little bit cuz I think we do hear gas. Oh, you're gaslighting me because somebody questions what you're doing or what you said one time.

Why is that piece important?

**robin stern:** I'm so glad you're asking me that because, it really is, misused quite a bit and weaponized and, I mean, the term itself is abused, right? So, and I think it's important because. Gaslighting can be so destroying. It's not, something that happens once and you feel devastated.

You might feel hurt, you might feel like, wait a minute, um, and take a step back. But gaslighting in the way that we're talking about it today. Is a process



over time where the more powerful person is manipulating the less powerful person and leading them to really second guess who they are and what they do.

And so there are instances where a gaslighting interaction can happen. For example, let's say we decide we're going to meet up at the grocery store before going to a movie. And we're gonna grab a bar, you know, a protein bar, and go in and watch a movie together.

When I get to the, um, grocery store, you're not there. And, I call you up on your phone and I say, where are you? When you say, oh, I'm at the movies. Remember we were gonna meet at the movies? And I said, no, we are gonna meet at the grocery store, and I'll, I'll grab you a protein bar. Oh, that's nice of you.

Thanks. And we go to the movies. And then the next time, um, something like that happens again where you are not where I think you're supposed to be or what we in fact agreed. I call you and I say, Hey Jill, where are you? And you say, oh my God, like you're so sensitive, where do you think I am?

Like, what's your problem? I'm not like leaving you flat. I'm just in the other place. And I think for a minute, well, you know, maybe I am sensitive about like commitment and agreement, but actually like, Like, we did agree on this other thing and so I'm just gonna let it go. So you tried to gaslight me in that moment, but I didn't take it.

I didn't take it up. I didn't, as I say in my book, I didn't give you my hand in the gaslight tango.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**robin stern:** I stood my ground and I said, well, yes, what you're saying is true, but that doesn't really have anything to do with, um, our agreement. The fact that I feel hurt that you didn't show up there. And um, so I might be in that moment taking a step back and saying, wait a minute, is she right?

Is she not right? Am I sensitive? Does it matter? But that doesn't leave me devastated.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**robin stern:** And so,



**Jill Stoddard:** Because it's only happened two times. Like it would have to be something that's happening repeatedly to the point where you're, like you said, second-guessing yourself, where you're going, am I crazy? Am I the one that keeps getting this wrong? Do I have dementia? Is somethin wrong with my cognitive function?

**robin stern:** Yeah. And in fact, I think in the way I told the story the way I hope, I just told that story the first time, there was just a disagreement. I said, no you don't. You didn't remember it correctly. The second time I went further and said, oh, you are just so sensitive. So I tried to get you to focus the second time I tried to make it your fault, right?

You are giving me a hard time cuz you are sensitive, you are hurt. But, my point is that you can disagree. And you can say, no, I didn't say this. You said this. , we remember it differently. That's not gaslighting.

But once I say, you're so, you're so sensitive that you're hurt because I didn't show up. That's where the gaslighting comes in because I'm saying you didn't show up and you were saying to me, you're so sensitive.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm. Right. Putting it back on you as if you've done something wrong or it's your fault in some way, or you're not seeing this clearly or realistically.

**robin stern:** And not dealing with whether or not you were supposed to be where I sit

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. right. And it's like calling the other person's reality into question.

**robin stern:** It's exactly that. Yes.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. And you are using a hypothetical example that this could be you and me. And I think that's an important point too. You know, the movie happens to be a heterosexual married couple, and I think we often think of gaslighting happening in romantic relationships.

But can, can gaslighting happen in any interpersonal relationship with a, you know, with a parent, with a friend?

**robin stern:** It often does happen with a parent and many times with a parent, it's inadvertent gaslighting. So, you know, at the extreme there are parents who are constantly, sadly and tragically actually saying to their kids, you're a loser. This is not working out for you cuz you are a loser. You failed that test.

You're a failure. It can be devastating for a child growing up with that kind of a parent who or is either dealing with their own anxiety or their own anger or disappointment by putting the other person down, blaming the other person or intentionally trying to make that person feel badly about themselves. Or that's not trying to make that person feel bad about themselves and that person's a bully, but they're bullying in a particular way.

Here they're gaslighting the other person so that the child ends up thinking, I'm a failure. You know, I thought, I was like, I didn't think I was a failure. I didn't think I was a bad person, but my parent who loves me and cares for me is telling me I'm a bad person. I must be a bad person.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. So how would you differentiate between just like main hypercritical or even verbal abuse versus. Like, wouldn't the gas lighting have to have almost like this element? You know what I always think of as I get this visual, people can't see us. We're not on video. But I always, um, to, to me, this is me like looking over both of my shoulders back and forth going, am I crazy?

Am I the only one who's seeing this? That feeling of like your reality just being upside down. So could it just be you're a failure or would they specifically have to do something like, You know, if the kid said, but I studied a lot, I studied as hard as I can. Well, no you didn't because remember you were like going to sports and you were going to parties, so you couldn't possibly have studied that hard, especially if you failed.

**robin stern:** That's a good example.

**Jill Stoddard:** Like that reality testing piece has to, not reality testing, but that calling that reality into question

**robin stern:** And that's a very concrete, that's a good example because it's a very concrete example. Calling someone a failure is also an example of gaslighting. It's not just you failed

the test, get to your room, it's you failed the test. You're a failure. You're a failure. And so if you know inside of yourself, I'm not a failure, I just, I didn't study that hard or I studied,

but like, I didn't do it. It also is calling your character into question.

**Jill Stoddard:** And it makes you second guess yourself. So that was the part of the definition. So it's sort of flat, like any behavior that's making you really second guess yourself. And that kind of results in that. Insecure anxiety, so certainly being told you're a failure would be an example of that.

**robin stern:** Yes, and certainly being told that you didn't study. Or you did study when you, when you didn't, or you did like something that is counter to what you experienced, what you did, the way you see the world is being told to you by the person who you love and trust. And so you are listening and you're thinking like, am I crazy? Exactly what you said. Am I crazy?

Nobody wants to spend time with you. Like of course you didn't get invited. Nobody wants to spend time with you.

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh yeah.

**robin stern:** Wait a minute. You know, I, I, I have friends. They don't really care about you, you know. But on the other hand, there are also times where, and, and this happened recently, and a, a guest on my podcast, a young teen, , was tell, telling us about her friend who was inadvertently gas lit by a mother who, , was very nervous and didn't want her to go to a particular concert.

So rather than the mother saying, I don't want you to go. Or I'm concerned about it and we're gonna have to make a better plan for being in touch. The mother told her, well, you don't wanna go to that concert. Only good girls don't go to that concert. And so by the end of several weeks of the mother going through that, over and over being very certain, no, this is not the kind of concert good girls go to, that young girl was second-guessing her sense of herself.

Wait a minute, maybe I'm not a good decision. Maybe I'm not the person I thought I was. Mother, cutting out articles about kids having alcohol poisoning or dying of a drug overdose or, , mobbing each other in, uh, in a crowd.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm. Right. Yeah, that, that makes sense. It's subtle, but it's there and you can see it in that outcome of the second guessing.

**robin stern:** And if the mother were here listening to this, she would say, of course, it was not my intention to gaslight my, she is a good girl.

**Jill Stoddard:** So sometimes it is intentional. Like in the movie it is absolutely intentional, deliberately manipulative, and then other times it may be more covert

**robin stern:** Yes. And one thing important that I do want to be sure to say to listen our listeners. People don't wake up in the morning and think, either I wanna gaslight someone today, or I'm gonna be a gaslightee today. In fact, people aren't born gaslighters. There is no particular personality type or mental health diagnosis that that leads someone to gaslight.

It's often tied to narcissism, and that is often true, but it's not necessarily the case. Gaslighting is socially learned.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**robin stern:** Gaslighting is learned because you witness other people doing it to each other. You experience it yourself. You have that like. Am I crazy feeling? But now you know how to do it because you've been on the other side, or you somehow happen into it in a moment where you, the gas slider feel destabilized, where you, the gas slider feel like, okay, I, how do I write myself here?

How do I gather myself here? And the way you gather yourself is pivoting in that conversation is saying to you, here's why you heard about this. Why are you so sensitive?

Rather than, I'm sorry, maybe we misremembered that, or maybe we miscommunicated and we each remember it in a different way.

**Jill Stoddard:** So in some cases, it can be more of a deliberate abuse tactic, but in other cases, it may be almost more of a defense.

**robin stern:** Yes, but in either case, the impact on the gas, it

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. I wanted to ask you about narcissism, and I think you might have just answered the question I wanted to ask. You know, are all gas liters, narcissists and do all narcissists gaslight, and I think you just answered the question that not all gas liters are narcissists.

I don't know about that second part though. I don't know that I've ever known a narcissist who doesn't. Gaslight, but what is the relationship? We do often hear these two things together. There's an assumption that if someone's a gaslight, it's because they're a narcissist. They get that label put on

**robin stern:** Right. I think, when someone is a narcissist, when there's a narcissistic injury, the tendency is to pivot, to blame, to throw it out there and make it someone else. So, I don't want to leave people thinking that they are so closely tied that their gaslight is probably a narcissist.

It may be. But not necessarily. And I think the important thing is what do you do when you're gaslighted? Not what is the diagnosis of your gaslight? And, um, and I, and this is where, for example, the skills of emotional intelligence come into play. That when you are in that moment where you're looking over your shoulder, you are activated.

Right. It's really hard to manage yourself. And one of the other things I, I wanna be sure to say in this interview is that one of the hardest things, and usually going from stage one as I've outlined the stages, stage one to stage two, where you're, um, Caught up in the, in either ruminating about the conversation, who's right or who's wrong, or you're actually in the conversation and it's going around in a circle. It's very hard for the gaslight to walk away in that stage. Very hard to walk away, to manage your own emotions and simply say, maybe you're right, but I just don't wanna have this conversation anymore. Maybe you're right, but I, I'm just. Not able to think it through right now. Let's come back to it. We have to agree to disagree cuz it takes a lot of self-management, takes several deep breaths and some cognitive control to be able to stand up to that gaslighting

**Jill Stoddard:** Or even just disengage, it sounds.

**robin stern:** And to disengage. Yes, exactly right. More importantly, to disengage and disengaging is really the only way. That you can begin to separate yourself from that, from that tango. And it's very hard. People tell me all the time, I can't stand the thought that my boss thinks that, um, I'm going through menopause. And that's why I keep getting the deadlines wrong, when in fact I'm not getting the deadlines wrong he keeps giving me deadlines and then changing his mind.

**Jill Stoddard:** So the gaslighting is often like, it's pushing that like fairness and justice button. Like you're misunderstanding me. You're getting it wrong. You're blaming me for something I didn't do. That's not right. It's not fair. I must stand up for myself. But then what's happening is that, does that serve a function for the gaslight?

Like are they getting what they want because they're effectively pushing our buttons?

**robin stern:** Sometimes, but I think sometimes it's just because I don't wanna deal with you, um, with the confrontation. I don't really remember what timeline I gave you. But I don't wanna be wrong. I'm not gonna say you are right And in fact, aren't you going through menopause anyway? You know, so maybe you misremembered, you know, people going through menopause can have foggy brains.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**robin stern:** So maybe you need to have some time off and in that situation, like yes, your sense of fairness and, I'm gonna say desperation sometimes to be seen and to be understood is just alarm bells are going off. Like he does not see me. He or, or he doesn't care. He's just going to go after his own agenda, which is to get off the hook and blame me.

**Jill Stoddard:** I wanna talk more about what to do when people find themselves in that, you know, they're being gaslight. But maybe we can kind of back up a little bit and talk like how, how do you even know that you're experiencing gaslighting? You talked about the three stages of gaslighting, so do you wanna talk a little bit about that?

Cause I think that sets the stage for, oh my God, yes. This is happening to me. Right. Like you need to, to be aware of that before you even know that there's something that can be done.

**robin stern:** Right. I'm really happy that my book gave what people are going through a name. That's what I hear often is like, were you sitting in my living room? Because the red flags of gaslighting are really quite common. And some of them are, you often feel confused and crazy. You have a great life, but somehow you're not happy.

You can't, you are having trouble making simple decisions. You lie to avoid the pivots and the, um, reality twist that you are going to have if you tell your partner the truth. you. Are constantly second guessing yourself. You're constantly apologizing. You're wondering all day long, am I, am I really a good enough partner?

Am I a good enough mom? Am I a good enough sister? Um, you know, something's terribly wrong, but you just don't know what to name it.

**Jill Stoddard:** And what about, like you mentioned earlier about clients that you had sat with who were sort of, you know, kicking butt in other domains of

their life, but then in this one relationship it was very different. So would that be one of those red flags if you're like competent and confident at work or you know, or parenting, but just when it comes to this partner or, some other like, well, some specific person or situation in your life where you're really second guessing yourself and feeling insecure that that could be a sign of

**robin stern:** Yes. So I would say that the red flag is you don't recognize yourself in this relationship.

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh yeah.

**robin stern:** You don't recognize yourself, or you are not the same person. You recognize that you are not, you don't have the confidence in yourself in this relationship that you had walking into this relationship.

that doesn't mean that you are in a gaslighting relationship of one or many of those things are true, but it means look further because it could be that, that sense of, I just don't feel right about things. Or I'm uncomfortable, or I don't feel strong in the way that I used to, or I don't like myself as much.

It's not the right question for you. May not be what's wrong with me. The right question might be like, what's going on in my relationship?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

So is there anything, you know, you've talked about kind of the signs, the red flags. Is there anything you think would be important for us to know specifically about? So you identify the stages as disbelief, defense, and depression. Is there anything in those that you think would be particularly helpful for listeners to know beyond some of these signs or red flags that you might be getting gaslit.

**robin stern:** So I, that's an interesting question. First time I've been asked it, so thank you for that. , I think what's, what's interesting about that is that, and just a few things that are popping into my mind, I'll answer with the end of the story before I go back and answer your question. So, It's always the case, or in my experience, it's always been the case that at the end of the relationship when the Gaslight walks away or the gaslight terror walks away or somebody, someone else gets the gaslight out. When I ask somebody, when did you have any early signs, they say on the first date,



On the third date, very early on in the relationship, or sometimes somebody will say, you know, it was great for a few years, but then all of a sudden these weird things started to happen. So it's usually been around a long time.

Such as being these kind of one-off weird statements like a client who I work with who's boyfriend would say to her as they walked down the street and she would be just saying hello to people and, um, friendly, engaging with friends in the neighborhood. He would say, why are you flirting?

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm.

**robin stern:** And she would say, I'm not flirting.

Come on, obviously, look the way they responded to you. You are flirting. And she would say, I'm not flirting. Don't be ridiculous. And then she would. Maybe go home and think it's weird that he keeps saying that I told him I'm not. Or, something that might be even stranger where here's an example.

Somebody goes on a date, two people went on a date and it was very hot at the end of the date. And so they were thinking about how to get home quickly. And one of them said, the guy said, I'm gonna take a cab home. And, uh, the woman said, I'm, I'm gonna walk. I don't wanna take the chance for getting into a cab, and there's gonna be no air conditioning.

And he said to her, you know what? There is something wrong with you that you're afraid of. Public transportation cabs, subways, buses. And she said, I didn't say that. He said, yes you did. He said, you're not willing to get in a cab. And he said, but, and she said, but that was because I had, don't I hot? I just wanna walk.

I'm just gonna walk. And so they met later on that night. When they both got to their homes, which were right near each other, and she thought to herself on the way home, that's kind of crazy. Like, I don't, I don't know if I wanna be with this guy again.

**Jill Stoddard:** So is it, so that's the disbelief part.

**robin stern:** The disbelief that he could say something that was so ba bizarre, you know, it was like, really? Like, that's what you think? I said, I didn't say that, but when she got home, He was so charming. They went out for wine. She was really attracted to him. He was really smart. She was looking for a really smart guy and she just forgot about it.

It's probably obvious the end of the story was that the relationship became a nightmare. He was really a, an intimidator gaslight as a matter of fact. And, um, she ultimately left him, but when she told the story, she knew. From the first night that there was something wrong, and yet what's so interesting about that is that you know, when you have a picture in front of you and 90% of the picture looks good to you and there's 10% of the picture that not right. It's

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. Well, and, and. And I'm sure when somebody's handsome or they're, they're smart, like you said, it's. It's compelling to ignore the red flags because you want it so bad, you know, it's, and maybe this is just a one-off.

So there's that, that disbelief. But then how does it turn into defense or depression? I'm assuming these are stages because they're things that occur over time. As long as you're staying in a relationship with someone who's a gaslighter.

**robin stern:** Exactly. And so, uh, yes, it's very compelling to look at all the things that. Is that are true for you with this guy? , or that you do feel about this guy that are positive, that keep you wanting to connect again and ignore that weird thing? Yes. Maybe it was a one off, like, I can't believe it, but maybe it was a one off and then it may happen again.

And then again you say to yourself, that was a one off, but then, excuse me, then if. The guy, if you are in the relationship where you're really buying into the his power, his certainty, and um, over time he keeps saying the same kind of thing to you. Like you don't know what you wanna do, why are you always putting down other people?

Wasn't putting anyone down. I just don't. Wanna go to that party. But you, you are someone who sees things negatively. Remember when you didn't wanna get into that cab? Remember now you don't wanna go to the party like, what's wrong with you? And so over time, with his certainty, with his power in the relationship, and I say power because you're like a compelled by attracted to the promise of this relationship, the power he has to change your mind.

Is kind of obvious. And so you then think maybe he's right because we as women, after all, since that's the pairing that is most often, although it happens in any relationship, um, we as women are taught to stand in someone else's shoes, to be empathic, to think, well, you know, maybe he had like a very difficult mother.

And so, you know, he pushes back When a woman makes a choice, he doesn't understand. I'm like, I'll let it go.

You know, and especially if we're very empathic, we can get stuck in someone else's shoes and forget about our own, right? So over time you start to think, could he be right? Could I have that negative cast?

I didn't get in that cab, in fact, and I didn't wanna go to that party and maybe there's something I need to explore. And so then what happens is in. The situations and the interactions with your gaslight, you begin to defend yourself because even though you're thinking maybe he's right, you are still rooted in your own reality.

I'm not really a negative person. I don't want him to think I'm a negative person. I know how to stand up for myself and what I'm, and what I really think, and this is it. So I'm gonna, I'm gonna defend myself. And so the second stage is marked by that defending yourself.

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm.

**robin stern:** Let me prove to you, I'm not a negative person.

Let's go out with other people. Let's take a cab tomorrow night. You know, let's, let me show you. And that's where your skills really need to be sharpened and enhanced in order to be able to move away. And the people I see in my practice are most often in stage two.

**Jill Stoddard:** Okay. And so I imagine then if they don't move away and the gaslight continues to just break them down, wear them down, make them second guess themselves. Maybe they defend themselves on, you know, the cab and the negativity, but the gaslight just finds something else to call into question to make them second guess that would then if you stay and don't get out in that stage, that's where you end up in that depression

**robin stern:** Yes. Aren't you forgetting that are, are you forgetting that too? So not only are you negative, but now you're forgetting things as well.

Like, what's wrong with you? Don't you remember we had this conversation last week.

**Jill Stoddard:** Are there certain traits that make someone more vulnerable to becoming a victim of gaslighting, or is this something that really could just sort

of end up happening to anybody. You know where you don't end up at spotting it, and you sort of get stuck in it.

**robin stern:** Yeah. So I think both. Yes. And there I think there are things that make you more vulnerable or that leave you more vulnerable if you, , are very agreeable if you have, uh, a history of, , accommodating. In a relationship, up even up to pathologically, accommodating, um, to use a clinical term with, uh, in, in your family if you, if your needs were overlooked, if you're always thinking about the other person's needs, if in fact you're very empathic, if you, , wanna be nice, if you like the image of holding hands and looking at the future together and you feel that, um, you like to be joined.

With the person you're with, you know, I like us to look at things in the same way, if you can't get him to agree with you, you'll ultimately end up agreeing with him to the point where you agree with him about the negative perception of you.

**Jill Stoddard:** And I wonder too if depending, you know, you're, you're kind of giving the example of. Romantic relationships, you know, if somebody's married, that makes it harder legally and logistically to leave. But I'm also thinking about the case. You know, if you have a parent who's a gaslight, you know, somebody where you, you only get one parent, like this is the parent you're stuck with.

And I imagine that, you know, that would be the harder, maybe not harder, but I could see that having its own set of challenges of trying to get away. Because this is your only mother, this is your only father, and you really wanna protect that relationship and make it

**robin stern:** that relationship. You want your parents to love you. They're supposed to love you. Um, you want your parents to be proud of you. Um, it's very sticky there. Very sticky. And, and depending on family culture, you may not even be allowed to, uh, speak your voice if you have it or if you can speak your voice.

You can only speak your voice if you agree.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

**robin stern:** there are many, one of the things that, that I ask people when I see them for the first time is, what were you, what was your dinner table like growing up?

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm.

**robin stern:** And I hear stories like, well, my father couldn't tolerate any disagreement. He would leave the table.

Or my mother would get very nervous if there was disagreement, knowing my father was gonna leave the table. So like, you learn not to disagree. You accommodate, you're

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. That's a great question. I might start using that one in my practice. You can learn a lot about a people's family, a person's family dynamics by asking what happens at the dinner table, or even if they say, we never sat down and had dinner together. You can learn a lot from

**robin stern:** say that's exactly right.

It's a very good question. I,

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, I love that. So let's talk a little bit about what to do, so, so if someone finds themselves in a relationship with a gaslight, you say in your book, I'm gonna quote you, you say quote, you must be willing to leave or it will not work, end quote. But you also suggest that leaving may not be necessary.

So how does someone determine whether they should leave or might be able to stay?

**robin stern:** Yeah. So one I would say going into even thinking about it is, You need to gather your compassion for yourself

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm.

**robin stern:** and, um, gather your social supports. And your own, um, your favorite go-to strategies for calming yourself, because there'll be lots of moments where you may feel like going back. Um, in fact, when I, when I was first writing the book and I, I was interviewing women who were leading, were leaders at battered women's shelters, they told me that it typically takes seven times or seven tries before a woman will leave an abusive relationship. And so if you're comforted by that or um, scared by that, it, it is a reality in those, in that, uh, situation, that corner of the world or that I haven't seen that necessarily be seven times in my practice, but it certainly can be not the first time. Certainly

you can try and you can, um, have the conversation and you can go into it thinking, If I don't have the answer I need to have, I have to leave.

If this doesn't stop, I have to leave.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

**robin stern:** But it's rarely just, I wanna say that it's really just a cognitive decision, like, okay, I'm going to leave. There is something inside like an inner knowing that at some point you just say, I've had enough. I just can't do it anymore. I just can't do it anymore. And even then, it can take you a long time to leave.

And during that long time in leaving or in deciding, you may change your mind a few times back and forth, especially if they're a children.

And in a family you may not be leaving. You may be really struggling with, how do I limit the gaslighting cuz I don't wanna give up my parents but I can't take it anymore.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah. And, and some of these situations must be incredibly complex when you end up talking about resources. If you're talking about, you know, significant abuse where an abuser has isolated, The victim where they don't have those supports because the abuser has isolated from the supports they used to have. If the abuser has made them stop working, if they don't have money, if they have children, it can be very, very complicated. But if we just look at maybe a less complicated version of this, right? Like maybe you're just dating somebody, maybe you've been dating for two or three years and you really love the person, but maybe you don't share a house or children or these other things.

And you have this sense, you know, you recognize that you went through the disbelief and the defense and now you're in this depression and you just know that this isn't healthy. Uh, you know, how do you guide people to resolve their ambivalence because they love this person. They've been, there's that sunk cost fallacy, right?

Like, well, I've already put so much into this, I can't leave. Now, how do you, how do you move people forward through that ambivalence to the place where like they really decide leaving is the right thing to do?

**robin stern:** With great difficulty. I'm thinking about a woman I worked with for many years who wasn't attached to the guy who was her gaslight. Um, in any economic way, they didn't live in the same city. He was married, she was not, she was available to him all the time. And, , their relationship really existed, uh, virtually, , such that she would have to go into her office late every morning because.

The time that they could have alone time to talk since he lived in, in the west, one of the states near California. , she had to call him at a certain time, like nine o'clock in the morning or something, and she didn't wanna do that. But when she told him, I don't wanna do that, he said to her, so you don't love me, do you? Because if you loved me, You would do that. This is what I'm telling you. I need, not only don't you love me, but you have no care for me. You're not even a nice person. I'm, I need this. And she knew that it wasn't the case, but she also knew that there must be something to it because why? Else, wouldn't she just willingly do it?

Like he was more important than her job really in her life. So why wasn't she just willing to do it? What was wrong with her that she couldn't love him fully?

Right. And so it became, even though there were no other external constraints for her to say to him, I'm sorry, I can't do these phone calls at that time, every day. It took two years.

**Jill Stoddard:** Wow.

**robin stern:** Two years of struggle and fear. So one of the reasons also that keeps people stuck is fear.

You know, fear of abandonment. I mean, in some cases it's fear. Fear of severing the relationship that's so important to you.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Right. And, and for the gas lighters who are particularly manipulative, you know, I've, I've worked with a number of people who have left partners who I think very much did have a narcissistic personality disorder, which of course I can't diagnose with without having seen them. But, you know, they, they were really probably the, the intimidator type of gaslight, which we didn't really get to the types of gaslight, but there's glamor and good guy and intimidator, and we don't have time to go into all this.

I recommend people pick up the book to get all of those. Really interesting details, but a lot of the fear, , you know, for her, the one person I'm thinking of



was he weaponized child custody against her as a way to try to keep her around. And it was, she wasn't ambivalent about leaving. She was certain about leaving, but she ran into, so, Many challenges, not only with his abuse and manipulation, but you know, just the system and the way the courts are set up.

Um, it is a, it is a huge challenge. Even if you get past that ambivalence and you want to leave it, it doesn't mean that it's, that it's easy.

**robin stern:** Or possible. And I

think, um, you know, one of the things that I wanted to share, and I, I do see the time, but that while I was researching this book I was in, , I was married to my ex-husband and, , he was a good guy, Gaslight. And there was something that, that he used to say to me that was really, on the one hand, no big deal because it was not a serious impediment to my life.

Or he would say, um, when he was late all the time for everything, for theater, for, , dinners, for par mitzvahs, , for, uh, doctor's appointments for the kids' school. , And when I would say, I really would appreciate it if you'd be on time, or I feel disrespected, or I'd like you to call me if you're gonna be late.

He would say, you have a problem with time.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**robin stern:** parents didn't teach you the right things about time. They left you very rigid and you have a problem with time. So of course when he first said that started going on about that, I thought, that's crazy. No, I don't have a problem with time, even though. I was writing about gaslighting.

I could feel myself slipping into this. Maybe he's right. Maybe I do hold time. In a very strange way. Maybe. Maybe I need to examine that so I didn't. Fall into it in, in a devastating way. I ultimately divorced him not because of that particular gaslighting in those interactions, but because of a larger, , lack of taking responsibility that it pointed to.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**robin stern:** But, it doesn't have to even be devastating for you to begin to lose your grip. On the way you think about the world on what you know. And so one of the things that I would say to myself during those years is, what would I do if

my daughter came to me and told me this story? Kind of instant reorientation, right?

Is, is this relationship allowing me to stand in my integrity

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**robin stern:** or do I feel a sense of wellbeing? Love should not. A relationship you love, uh, where you are in love with someone and they're in love with you should not feel like this doesn't feel right,

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

**robin stern:** this interaction over and over and over again

**Jill Stoddard:** Well, and I think that that over and over and over again, I know we said this in the beginning, but that it, it keeps occurring to me how important that is because the example you just gave of your husband, I thought, Well, I think that's a good thing that you started out by engaging in self-reflection.

So for example, early on in my relationship with my husband, he pointed out that I'm not very good at apologizing. That it's hard for me to take responsibility when you know we have certain arguments. And my first response was to be very defensive. And then I thought about it and was like, oh my God, he's right.

I'm a monster. And he actually was right. And this really required some reflection on my part. But that's the one and only time I can think of where he was giving me that sort of feedback, where I reflected and I realized he was right and I got better. And, but it hasn't been this repeated pattern that's caused me to constantly second guess myself, so that, that really does feel like such an important aspect of this.

Let

**robin stern:** It is. And, and when you, and if you can take a pause, go out for coffee, visit a friend, especially visit a friend who knew you before, um, and you can look at the interaction and write it down and see where the interactions you're having pivot to. It's no longer about him being late. It's about my, my having a problem with time.

So he never apologized. He never said, you know what, maybe I'll look at it too, or

let's have a conversation about it so that when you have some distance, you can see what's going on in the moment when you feel like, oh my God, like, like what's happening here? Maybe I am wrong. Women tend to point the finger at themselves and say, there's something wrong with me.

The minute you start to second guess yourself, you're not, you're no longer focus on, wait a minute. That's true. Even if I have a problem with time, you're still late and I still

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. Right. And when in, in any interpersonal situation, usually it takes two to tango, right? There's usually, like we, we typically both own some

part. Of something. And if, and a and a gaslight is someone who probably is typically not ever owning theirs and putting everything on you and

making you second guess yourself.

Lemme ask you one, one last question cuz I see we're, we're out of time here, but, so you have your, your two books and the Gaslight Effect Recovery Guide, that's really like a, um, like a workbook for

people. Do you, who's the right. Audience for this book? Like is it the person who has decided, okay, clearly I've been in this pattern of gaslighting, I see it and I need help, I wanna get out.

Versus the person who's still kind of in that really ambivalent, not ready to leave. Like, do you know what I'm saying? Like who's the best person to kind of benefit, read and read and benefit from this book, do you

**robin stern:** That's a great question. So I would say that, um, Anyone who's struggling in a relationship that you're not sure what's going on and you tend to blame yourself, or you're just feeling uncomfortable, excuse me, or you're just feeling uncomfortable and lousy about yourself in the relationship. Um, Pick up the book because there are so many, not only, um, reflections, but exercises and quizzes.

And I do a number of sidebars throughout the, um, the book that help you to think a little bit more deeply, more psychodynamically about what's going on, like where I talk about early experiences and how they give you a map for relationships, what they're supposed to look like, and how does that, how that impacts you or pathological accommodation.

For example, is something that I talk about. So those are, that's great information for any relationship

**Jill Stoddard:** Absolutely. And I think the book, it's so clarifying because when you're in that place of whipping your head back and forth going, am I crazy? Am I the only one seeing this? You're stuck up in your head with that. And I think being able to work through, like reading about some of the things we've talked about today about a lot more, and working through the exercises and writing it down, it just creates, I think, a lot of clarity that will help people.

Move forward and get unstuck if they find themselves in a relationship like this. Well, Robin, it's been so lovely to chat with you. I wish we had more time. I feel like I could talk to you all day. Tell our listeners if they wanna learn more or they wanna find you where, where can they find you and connect with you?

**robin stern:** Thank you, Jill, for having me on the podcast. Um, I feel the same. We could just keep talking about it and I'm very interested to know how your, um, lens, uh, looks at, at gaslighting as well. Um, so maybe we can have that other conversation and you come on my podcast or there's a take two on yours.

Um, you can find me at [robinstern.com](http://robinstern.com) and, you can link to my podcast there as well.

Uh, you can find me at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, where, uh, I work with Mark Brackett to teach people, um, how to have a, uh, live a more emotionally intelligent life and to be, to know that emotions matter and, um, to, uh, regard emotions yours and others with curiosity and, um, and lack of judgment, and to give yourself the permission to feel, which is of course the name of Mark's book.

**Jill Stoddard:** We had him on the podcast to talk about that book.

**robin stern:** Yes. And it's wonderful. Um, and so thank you and I hope that you and all of our listeners can work to bring their lives to a point where they are, um, resilient to attempts at gaslighting and, uh, can live gaslight free, can have gaslight free relationships.

**Jill Stoddard:** Me too. Well, we will link to all of those resources in our show notes as well. So thank you again, Robin. This was great.

**robin stern:** Thank you, Jill. Bye.

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