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A Message to Women From a Man: You Are Not "Crazy"

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React
>

You're so sensitive. You're so emotional. You're defensive. You're overreacting. Calm down. Relax. Stop freaking out! You're crazy! I was just joking, don't you have a sense of humor? You're so dramatic. Just get over it already!

Sound familiar?

If you're a woman, it probably does.

Do you ever hear any of these comments from your spouse, partner, boss, friends, colleagues, or relatives after you have expressed frustration, sadness, or anger about something *they* have done or said?

When someone says these things to you, it's not an example of inconsiderate behavior. When your spouse shows up half an hour late to dinner without calling -- that's inconsiderate behavior. A remark intended to shut you down like, "Calm down, you're overreacting," after you just addressed someone else's bad behavior, is emotional manipulation, pure and simple.

And this is the sort of emotional manipulation that feeds an epidemic in our country, an epidemic that defines women as crazy, irrational, overly sensitive, unhinged. This epidemic helps fuel the idea that women need only the slightest provocation to unleash their (crazy) emotions. It's patently false and unfair.

I think it's time to separate inconsiderate behavior from emotional manipulation, and we need to use a word not found in our normal vocabulary.

I want to introduce a helpful term to identify these reactions: gaslighting.

Gaslighting is a term often used by mental health professionals (I am not one) to describe manipulative behavior used to confuse people into thinking their reactions are so far off base that they're crazy.

The term comes from the 1944 MGM film, *Gaslight*, starring Ingrid Bergman. Bergman's husband in the film, played by Charles Boyer, wants to get his hands on her jewelry. He realizes he can accomplish this by having her certified as insane and hauled off to a mental institution. To pull off this task, he intentionally sets the gaslights in their home to flicker off and on, and every time Bergman's character reacts to it, he tells her she's just seeing things. In this setting, a gaslighter is someone who presents false information to alter the victim's perception of him or herself.

Today, when the term is referenced, it's usually because the perpetrator says things like, "You're so stupid," or "No one will ever want you," to the victim. This is an intentional, pre-meditated form of gaslighting, much like the actions of Charles Boyer's character in *Gaslight*, where he strategically plots to confuse Ingrid Bergman's character into believing herself unhinged.

The form of gaslighting I'm addressing is not always pre-mediated or intentional, which makes it worse, because it means all of us, especially women, have dealt with it at one time or another.

Those who engage in gaslighting create a reaction -- whether it's anger, frustration, sadness -- in the person they are dealing with. Then, when that person reacts, the gaslighter makes them feel uncomfortable and insecure by behaving as if their feelings aren't rational or normal.

My friend Anna (all names changed to protect privacy) is married to a man who feels it necessary to make random and unprompted comments about her weight. Whenever she gets upset or frustrated with his insensitive comments, he responds in the same, defeating way, "You're so sensitive. I'm just joking."

My friend Abbie works for a man who finds a way, almost daily, to unnecessarily shoot down her performance and her work product. Comments like, "Can't you do something right?" or "Why did I hire you?" are regular occurrences for her. Her boss has no problem firing people (he does it regularly), so you wouldn't know from these comments that Abbie has worked for him for six years. But every time she stands up for herself and says, "It doesn't help me when you say these things," she gets the same reaction: "Relax; you're overreacting."

Abbie thinks her boss is just being a jerk in these moments, but the truth is, he is making those comments to manipulate her into thinking her reactions are out of whack. And it's exactly that kind manipulation that has left her feeling guilty about being sensitive, and as a result, she has not left her job.

But gaslighting can be as simple as someone smiling and saying something like, "You're so sensitive," to somebody else. Such a comment may seem innocuous enough, but in that moment, the speaker is making a judgment about how someone else should feel.

While dealing with gaslighting isn't a universal truth for women, we all certainly know plenty of women who encounter it at work, home, or in personal relationships.

And the act of gaslighting does not simply affect women who are not quite sure of themselves. Even vocal, confident, assertive women are vulnerable to gaslighting.

Why?

Because women bare the brunt of our neurosis. It is much easier for us to place our emotional burdens on the shoulders of our wives, our female friends, our girlfriends, our female employees, our female colleagues, than for us to impose them on the shoulders of men.

It's a whole lot easier to emotionally manipulate someone who has been conditioned by our society to accept it. We continue to burden women because they don't refuse our burdens as easily. It's the ultimate cowardice.

Whether gaslighting is conscious or not, it produces the same result: It renders some women emotionally mute.

These women aren't able to clearly express to their spouses that what is said or done to them is hurtful. They can't tell their boss that his behavior is disrespectful and prevents them from doing their best work. They can't tell their parents that, when they are being critical, they are doing more harm than good.

When these women receive any sort of push back to their reactions, they often brush it off by saying, "Forget it, it's okay."

That "forget it" isn't just about dismissing a thought, it is about self-dismissal. It's heartbreaking.

No wonder some women are unconsciously passive aggressive when expressing anger, sadness, or frustration. For years, they have been subjected to so much gaslighting that they can no longer express themselves in a way that feels authentic to them.

They say, "I'm sorry," before giving their opinion. In an email or text message, they place a smiley face next to a serious question or concern, thereby reducing the impact of having to express their true feelings.

You know how it looks: "You're late :)"

These are the same women who stay in relationships they don't belong in, who don't follow their dreams, who withdraw from the kind of life they want to live.

Since I have embarked on this feminist self-exploration in my life and in the lives of the women I know, this concept of women as "crazy" has really emerged as a major issue in society at large and an equally major frustration for the women in my life, in general.

From the way women are portrayed on reality shows, to how we condition boys and girls to see women, we have come to accept the idea that women are unbalanced, irrational individuals, especially in times of anger and frustration.

Just the other day, on a flight from San Francisco to Los Angeles, a flight attendant who had

come to recognize me from my many trips asked me what I did for a living. When I told her that I write mainly about women, she immediately laughed and asked, "Oh, about how crazy we are?"

Her gut reaction to my work made me really depressed. While she made her response in jest, her question nonetheless makes visible a pattern of sexist commentary that travels through all facets of society on how men view women, which also greatly impacts how women may view themselves.

As far as I am concerned, the epidemic of gaslighting is part of the struggle against the obstacles of inequality that women constantly face. Acts of gaslighting steal their most powerful tool: *their voice*. This is something we do to women every day, in many different ways.

I don't think this idea that women are "crazy," is based in some sort of massive conspiracy. Rather, I believe it's connected to the slow and steady drumbeat of women being undermined and dismissed, on a daily basis. And gaslighting is one of many reasons why we are dealing with this public construction of women as "crazy."

I recognize that I've been guilty of gaslighting my women friends in the past (but never my male friends--surprise, surprise). It's shameful, but I'm glad I realized that I did it on occasion and put a stop to it.

While I take total responsibility for my actions, I do believe that I, along with many men, am a byproduct of our conditioning. It's about the general insight our conditioning gives us into admitting fault and exposing any emotion.

When we are discouraged in our youth and early adulthood from expressing emotion, it causes many of us to remain steadfast in our refusal to express regret when we see someone in pain from our actions.

When I was writing this piece, I was reminded of one of my favorite Gloria Steinem quotes, "The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn."

So for many of us, it's first about *unlearning* how to flicker those gaslights and *learning* how to acknowledge and understand the feelings, opinions, and positions of the women in our lives.

But isn't the issue of gaslighting ultimately about whether we are conditioned to believe that women's opinions don't hold as much weight as ours? That what women have to say, what they feel, isn't quite as legitimate?

Yashar will be soon releasing his first short e-book, entitled, A Message To Women From A Man: You Are Not Crazy -- How We Teach Men That Women Are Crazy and How We Convince Women To Ignore Their Instincts. If you are interested and want to be notified when the book is released, please click [here](#) to sign-up.

I hope you will [join me on Facebook](#) and [follow me on Twitter](#).

This piece originally appeared on [The Current Conscience](#).

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