



## Medical Gaslighting: Signs To Watch For

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You've probably heard of gaslighting — but what happens when it's coming from your doctor? Understanding medical gaslighting may help improve your experience with the healthcare industry.

### What is medical gaslighting?

Medical gaslighting is when a healthcare provider's behavior makes you feel unheard, unimportant or unwelcome. You may even question if your symptoms are *real*. This can cause misdiagnoses, delay vital care and break the trust between you and your provider. The result? You may be less likely to seek healthcare in the future.

### Signs of medical gaslighting

Your provider may be gaslighting you if they:

- Diagnose you without a thorough examination
- Dismiss or downplay the importance of your symptoms
- Refuse to address certain topics or concerns
- Make assumptions about you
- Tell you your symptoms are “all in your head”
- Ignore requests for tests or referrals (without explaining why they may not be a good fit)
- Shame or blame you for your condition
- Make rude or condescending comments about you
- Talk over or ignore you
- Try to talk you out of getting a second opinion

### Why medical gaslighting happens

Most healthcare providers want to give you the best care, but time constraints, burnout, misunderstandings and more can affect your experience. While medical gaslighting can happen to anyone, it happens most often to women and people who already face barriers in the healthcare system. Providers may be influenced by unconscious bias or lack the training to recognize culturally nuanced symptoms. Factors that influence medical gaslighting include:

- **Tight provider schedules:** The average appointment with a primary care provider in the U.S. is just 18 minutes long. Rushing means less back-and-forth between doctor and patient, which can result in mistakes and misunderstandings.
  - **Diagnostic training:** Providers are trained to rule out common health conditions before considering more unusual ones. That can slow down the process of diagnosing rare and orphan diseases.
  - **Limited resources:** In the U.S., your insurance often determines the tests and procedures you can get. That can hamper providers' efforts to investigate your symptoms.
  - **Misunderstanding emotions:** Sometimes, caregivers might read anxiety, tears or frustration as a sign of a mental health issue when it's really just a natural reaction to a tough situation.
  - **Physician burnout:** The American Medical Association says lacking empathy and thinking poorly of patients is a hallmark of provider burnout. Rates peaked at 62.8% in 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The rate's now below 50%, but not by much.
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- **Evolving understanding:** Even the best doctors aren't experts on everything. And many conditions — like long COVID or fibromyalgia — aren't well understood.
- **Personality mismatches:** Not every provider's style clicks with every patient. Some physicians may tell jokes that you don't find funny. Others may be dry in a way you find unwelcoming. It's important to find a provider that matches your communication style.

In the past, it was normal for physicians to overrule their patients' wishes and even withhold medical information. Today, patients have a right to be informed and make their own medical decisions. But some caregivers still believe they know best.

### **What to do about it**

Gaslighting is never your fault but knowing your rights and options can help you protect yourself. You have power, too. Here are some ways to improve the odds of your visit going well and address gaslighting if it happens.

### **Before the appointment**

Doing a little homework and jotting down questions before your appointment can help you feel more prepared. And don't just research symptoms and treatments. Research your provider, too. Patient reviews and provider bios can help you know what to expect. In addition to informing yourself, do what you can to better inform your provider. Symptom journals, medication lists, old medical records — collect them all and share them with your care team. One of the best ways to prepare for a visit with your provider is to invite a buddy. It helps to have somebody else there to hear what the doctor is saying and pick up any pieces you may have missed.

### **During the appointment**

Here are a few tips to help your visit go smoothly:

- **Set expectations:** At the start of your appointment, let your provider know about any questions or concerns you have. They should make them a priority.
- **Ask clarifying questions:** Sometimes, the problem isn't gaslighting. Medical jargon, for example, is a major source of misunderstanding. So, ask follow-up questions and recap the main points of the visit. That ensures you're on the same page.
- **Take notes:** If you can, take notes during your visit. That way, you have a record of your conversation in your own words.
- **Advocate for yourself:** Helping you is your provider's job. If they don't discuss a treatment option with you, ask why. If you need a translator, request one. If they ask you to sign a consent form, read it first. And if you're uncomfortable, say so.

### **After your appointment**

Well, *that* didn't go well! If you aren't satisfied with the care you received in a healthcare setting, there are a few different things you can do about it.

If you think your provider is gaslighting you, **get a second opinion**. Consulting with another provider will either reassure you that your doctor is on track or validate your concerns. Getting a second opinion is very common in healthcare — especially for a major diagnosis, or a condition with lots of treatment options.

Another option is **contacting the ombudsman**. An ombudsman is like a professional mediator who works at a hospital. If you're unsatisfied with the care you receive at a hospital, it's their job to help you. If you make a complaint, they'll address it with the doctor and try to resolve the situation. If there isn't an ombudsman at your medical facility, speak with the manager of the practice or a patient services representative.

If you don't trust your provider to give you quality care or treat you with respect, it's time to find a new one. That's a power that we, as patients, often forget we have. Remember, you're the most important person in the room in any appointment.