

This video and my research focus on gaslighting and the emotionally abusive culture often prevalent in mainstream Western media, whether it be in romance movies or hard metal music. I studied cases from young social media stars and their fall from fame to the correlation of children being exposed to adult topics and their likelihood to be abusive later in their life. As I learned more about these difficult topics, I began to realize just how intricately themes of unhealthy relationships are woven into what we all watch, listen to, and read, and how much of this I had internalized from a young age, despite having a comparably sheltered childhood from the media.

I chose animation as my medium because I felt I needed to use time as a factor of my art. I found it important to emphasize that emotionally abusive relationships and situations of gaslighting can develop over time. By animating the clip from the movie *Gaslight* (1944) instead of simply inserting it into my video, I was able to make it my own. I animated only the two figures in order to erase any sort of background or unneeded details, and focus solely on the interaction between the couple. By animating my own eyes, I made it personal enough to show that this topic affects me greatly, but consciously omitted my entire face in order to show that I'm not the only one, and that this issue is much bigger than one couple, two couples, or even couples in general. These topics involve parents, children, and young adults alike, as we all choose how to take in the messages around us and internalize them.

Shira S.

New Hampshire

Gaslighting And The Normalization Of Abuse In Mainstream Media

Shira S.



The first time a boy asked me out I said, “No,” almost immediately. His response to this was, “But what have I ever done to make you dislike me?” This made me pause for a second to think, because it was true. He’d never done anything, yet I knew that I simply didn’t enjoy his presence, and I didn’t want to put myself in a position of having to pretend to anyone about how I felt about them. He then pestered me for a while longer and tried to change my mind. “I’m a nice guy! I promise!” and, “Just think about it, ok?” were repeated *many* times. But all that was going through my mind at the time was, “If you’re such a nice guy, why can’t you take no for an answer?” The fact that he kept trying to change my mind was what convinced me exactly the opposite of what he was saying. If he can’t understand no with something as harmless as a date, when else would he overlook my consent? If he’s trying to pressure me now, when else would he pressure me? If he won’t let me leave now, when else wouldn’t he? It is important to note, however, that I was lucky that this was happening in a place with plenty of people around and the guy was someone who I trusted perhaps above most of my friends. This means that, other than slight annoyance, I felt safe, which is more than many women can say when they are put in similar positions. Many of my friends have agreed to dates simply because they didn’t feel safe rejecting the person, for fear of them acting rashly out of anger.

A few months later our friendship was back on track, and we were talking about what had happened. He sheepishly explained that he thought that I was playing hard to get, and that he thought that girls liked it when guys were persistent, like in the film, *The Notebook* (2004). That’s when I first started thinking about the actual messages these books, movies, and songs are sending to young people all over the world. Although he probably could’ve used his own judgment to realize that no means no, was it really his fault when all the messages he was receiving from the media around him were telling him that girls like “persistent” guys?

Unfortunately, this story is minor and harmless compared with those I’ve heard from loved ones, from *all* genders. One friend told me about how a boy she had been hooking up with had told her repeatedly that he would never want to date her and didn’t want anything other than sex, but that she needed him because no one else would ever find her attractive. Leaving him became a drawn out process; he would make new social media accounts and text her from different numbers after she repeatedly blocked him. This pattern of behavior continued for a few months, in addition to him randomly showing up to places he knew that she frequented. A few months later, she saw that he had a new girlfriend, and she still feels guilty because she didn’t know how to warn the girl. Another friend came to me to talk about how his girlfriend would pressure him for sex, saying that he wasn’t “man enough” for her if he said he wasn’t in the mood. She would later go to her friends and talk about it to them, which he felt was a breach of his confidence. When he confronted her though, she accused him of trying to isolate her from her friends and explained to him that “she tells her friends everything and that this wasn’t any different.” These situations are only too common, as are the phrases and patterns between each case. Yet it seems as though hardly anyone talks about this sufficiently to go through signs and red flags that people should be looking out for. It can’t be someone’s fault for falling into a trap when the trap is lined with compliments and romance. America is a country of free speech, therefore the permissiveness of the media can go almost unchecked, leaving it to the parents to regulate what their children watch, which fewer and fewer are doing. After all, if the rating says it’s ok, then it must be ok, right?

Such was the case with Kiki (Kirsten) Kannibal. Her parents referred to it as a “creative way of self-expression” when she posted sexually-charged photos of herself on her MySpace account at age fourteen, and didn’t think much of it. Over time, Kiki rose to online stardom, as is the dream for so many young girls. However, it came with some drawbacks. Like any celebrity,

she began to receive more and more hate-mail, saying things like, “I’ll fucking kill you, bitch” (a direct quote from one of her followers). Eventually it escalated to dangerous levels: her house was vandalized with the word “slut” spray painted in neon green; and then came the truly horrific part: Her online boyfriend, “Mr. MySpace,” came to her house late one night and raped her in her own bed. Her parents were forced to relocate the family and reconsider their parenting techniques. Or at least that’s what the many articles in reputable platforms such as *The Miami New Times*, and *Rolling Stone*, say about them. “Despite the harassment, her parents never insisted Kiki get offline, and soon she met a boy through MySpace” says the *Miami New Times*. While I agree that they were perhaps too permissive in their parenting style, it seems that almost every analysis of the story accepts the haters’ and Mr. MySpace’s actions as provoked by her behavior. Of course the rapist was condemned, yet it is too often thought of as a cause and effect situation, when a victim of a sex crime should never be blamed in any way.

The media’s reaction of underplaying what the perpetrators of the crime did and instead focusing on Kiki’s actions is called *gaslighting*, which is a common occurrence when it comes to any abusive or toxic situation. The term officially means “to manipulate (someone) by psychological means into questioning their own sanity or experiences” (Oxford English Dictionary). It originated from the movie *Gaslight* (1944), where a husband uses forms of emotional abuse in order to control his wife, but convinces her that she’s insane so that she thinks he is actually taking care of her. By telling her that she’s insane, he is able to control her through reminding her how forgetful she is and telling her that she dreams up events that didn’t actually happen. This is a common tactic used both by the abuser to convince the victim not to go for help, as well as people outside the relationship when they don’t believe that emotional abuse is as harmful as it actually is. Society is constantly gaslighting victims as they come forward, whether it’s a man who is told that “he’s a man, he can take it,” or woman who only hears “men have needs, you should’ve worn a longer skirt,” when she seeks justice. A prime example of the latter situation would be the rape trial this last year when the defendant’s lawyer held up the seventeen year old girl’s thong in court to attempt to prove her consent. “Does the evidence out-rule the possibility that she was attracted to the defendant and was open to meeting someone and being with someone?” the lawyer asked, according to *The Irish Times*. “You have to look at the way she was dressed. She was wearing a thong with a lace front.” And the truly horrifying part of all of this is that the rapist in this case was acquitted by the judge, and the seventeen year old victim committed suicide. (*The New York Times*).

We are coming into a new age as a society: the era of social media and online networking. Children are exposed to the world of sex, drugs, and scandal at younger and younger ages, and it seems that parents have little to no control over what, where, and when their children learn about such traditionally adult topics. Internet porn is now the fifth most common online search for children ages six and up, according to James P. Steyer in *Talking Back to Facebook: A Common Sense Guide*, and movie and pop stars are becoming more and more risqué role models. Although I am reluctant to hate on anyone’s parenting style, several studies reveal that was frequently exposed to pornographic content is more likely to sexually assault someone in the future, says Steyer.

You don’t have to go as far as porn to get disturbing messages directed at young people, you just have walk down the aisle of the romance section at your local library or bookstore, or scroll through the genre on Netflix. When all twelve year olds are hearing is that consent is consent no matter how it’s achieved and that street harassment is cute as long as the harasser is attractive, it’s hard to filter all that out. Let me give you some examples:

Bruno Mars has a reputation of catering to the fans of love pop music, many of which happen to be young people. In his song *Grenade*, he sings "...Gave you all I had and you tossed it in the trash/ You tossed it in the trash, you did/ To give me all your love is all I ever ask/ 'Cause what you don't understand is/ I'd catch a grenade for ya (yeah yeah)/ Throw my head on a blade for ya (yeah yeah)/ I'd jump in front of a train for ya (yeah yeah)/ You know I'd do anything for ya (yeah yeah)/ Oh whoa oh/ I would go through all this pain/ Take a bullet straight through my brain/ Yes I would die for you baby/ But you won't do the same..." I'm sure that these lines have captured the hearts of many preteens (including twelve year old me) who have decided they know what true love is. Yet its insinuation of the pressure to love someone back just because of their feelings towards you is completely overlooked. This (perhaps tamely) illustrates the previous situation mentioned where many people agree to things they aren't comfortable, whether it be a date or sex, simply because of either they don't want to hurt the other person's feelings, or are afraid to say no. In *The Notebook*, Noah hangs from a Ferris wheel fifty feet off the ground and threatens to let go if Allie doesn't say yes to a date. He later harasses her on the street when she quite obviously doesn't want to talk to him. The abuse in the movie goes both ways though. Forty minutes in, Allie pushes him against his car and slaps him multiple times when he refuses to move to New York with her. This sends the message that it's okay for girls to hit boys because they're supposedly bigger and stronger so they can take it. If it had been the other way around and Noah had been the one to lay a hand on Allie in such a violent way the movie would have a completely different rating than its PG-13 one. "I thought it was a love story worth telling" says Rachel McAdams in an interview with Hollywood Archive on her part of Allie in the movie. These are just two examples of common themes that are ever-present throughout media and constantly being normalized, especially the kind directed at children that are just starting to get involved in the dating world.

And yet, these examples from mainstream media are comparatively tame. In fact, Spotify completed a survey of their listeners and discovered the metal fans are the most loyal listeners, according to *Noisey*. Another survey by *MetalStorm* concluded that the average metalhead age ranges from 14-25. The lyrics of these songs aren't exactly butterflies and rainbows. In Judas Priest's song, *Love Bites*, they sing: "when you feel safe/ when you feel warm/ that's when I rise/...Into your room/ Where in deep sleep/ There you lie still/ To you I creep/ ...Now you are mine/ In my control/ One taste of your life/ And I own your soul." This is just one example of the disturbing images these lyrics create in the minds of young teenagers. The sets for these concerts often display violent and provoking images such as half or fully nude women being tortured or sometimes even raped in plain sight (Miedzian, p. 256). These images, especially when directed at young people, become as an excuse for future violence in relationships and sexual assault. It creates a warped a warped vision that rape is "hot" and that it's "sexy" for a woman to struggle. An important disclaimer to make is that not all heavy metal or rock artists contribute to this and some do use their positions of influence over young people to raise awareness for subjects such as police brutality, homophobia, sexual assault, and the AIDS crisis. Many do throw benefit concerts for these issues and donate to charities to address these subjects.

The effect of these themes in such common media trivializes the struggles that so many people go through, and turns this kind of abuse and toxicity into a romanticized joke. This can prevent victims from feeling as though the travesty they went through is enough to report or as though they will not be taken seriously enough. Victims already put themselves at such a risk when coming forward, fearing retaliation from their partner if their case fails and they are left abandoned and unprotected by the law, that it is imperative that everyone feels as though that they will be heard and their concerns met. Secondly, it creates a culture that these injustices are acceptable, and

even “romantic” and “cute.” This means that there is a much higher chance that abuse rates will rise exponentially and unchecked, as they are, according to *The Standard*.

Over the past two years the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women has reported “a tremendous increase in the representation of violence against women, particularly sexual violence, in the media” (Stankiewicz and Rosselli, 2008, p. 581). Several studies show that in the recent past, scenes of abuse, both emotional and physical, as well as rape and sexual assault have risen in media, leading to the desensitization of the audience and a higher tolerance for male aggression in relationships. These statistics correlate strongly to the fact that one in three women have been sexually coerced in a relationship, and that 90% of the documented partner violence crimes have been committed by men (Cundiff, p. 2).

At the beginning of her book, *Boys Will Be Boys*, Myriam Miedzian describes the reactions of her male colleagues, friends, and family when she told them what her book would be about. The phrase “but not all men” was repeated to her too many times for her to count. “Men have never been subject to the kind of scathing generic criticism to which women have been subjected throughout history,” she continues.; “... Freud and other prominent psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg base their theories of moral development exclusively on the studies of boys. When it is discovered that girls do not conform to the boys’ model, they are declared defective.” She explains that throughout history society has become accustomed to analyzing males as the “norm” of the human race, and the woman as a human form that is strange because she is different from a man. Therefore, society is used to questioning women’s actions and psyche much more than men’s. So when we attempt to figure out all the reasons behind men’s violence, we typically point to women’s actions to try to explain it. From men such as Hitler to teenage school shooters, many psychologists and historians look to the women in their lives, some going so far as to blame Hitler’s “mommy issues” for the chaos and travesties he caused. So when we try to come up with solutions for issues such as emotional abuse and violence against women, we look towards the women’s actions and how they caused the man’s, such as with Kiki Kannibal and blaming the assaults against her on her provocative posts.

There seems to be no solution in sight. As much as I wish I could, I can’t wave my magic wand and make it all go away. It seems, instead, that we simply have to become more vigilant. We must look for warning signs to know when we are in an emotionally abusive situation in order to convince ourselves to go for help. And above all, we must stop gaslighting both ourselves and each other. There seems to be no definitive way of knowing what an emotionally abusive situation is because everyone has different ideas of what is “too much” for them. However, there are definitely patterns between each case. Here are some common actions that emotional abusers commit:

- Uses jealousy and over-protectiveness as an excuses to know where you are and what you’re doing at all time
- Doesn’t take your ideas, opinions, or concerns in consideration and laughs at them
- Uses sex or for leverage, or as a punishment/reward
- Doesn’t stop doing something when asked, whether of a sexual nature or not
- Sets “rules” for you and gets angry when they are overlooked and takes it as a lack of respect

- Treats you as a child and assumes the role of a “caretaker” insisting that everything they do is for your own good in order to convince you that you’re dependent on them and that you need them
- Convinces you that you’re ugly or stupid and that no one else would be attracted to you
- Isolates you or decides who you can or can’t see or talk to
- Uses guilt in order to convince or pressure you into doing things that you aren’t comfortable with
- Is emotionally distant or unavailable without explaining why and gets angry for seemingly no reason
- Makes excuses, blames other people or things and overall refuses to take responsibility for their actions and words
- Views you and treats you as an object or an extension of themselves instead of your own person
- Doesn’t care about your emotions and punishes/gets angry if you’re angry at them
- Shares personal details about you to other people without asking first
- Makes threats of physical violence and negative remarks in order to control you
- Denies being emotionally abusive if confronted

*It is important to note that each situation is different, and so there may be extensions added to the list or *some* things taken down depending on people’s comfort levels.

So what can we do to fix this? How can we stop more victims falling into this trap? The first thing we can do is to educate more people about this issue in order to give victims a more accepting society to tell their stories and to prevent more people from emotionally abusing their partners without even knowing what they’re doing. By educating more people, we would show them that the mainstream media completely overlooks this, and hopefully convince fewer people to subscribe to this type of brainwashing. The media works on a supply and demand philosophy, which means that the fewer people who watch these movies and shows, read these books, and listen to this music, the less of it will be created. The next solution that comes to mind is opening up the topic for discussion with younger people, especially young boys. Teaching young children what’s right and wrong when it comes to treating their partners early on through simple exercises and games means they will grow up to be more considerate and kind adults. One such exercise is being taken up by early education teachers all over the country. They assign one student to be the “greeter” for a week. This student stands at the door of the classroom each morning and greets the other students as they enter the classroom. Each student can choose between a hug, a handshake, a fist bump, or a high five as a greeting. This system creates an atmosphere of love and appreciation for each student, and also teaches to ask for consent for any type of physical touch. Additionally, it gives younger boys a safe space to interact in a physically close way (such as hugging) before social norms teach them that physical touch is only right if it’s for a sexual purpose. Switching up the greeter every week teaches the children that each person has a different comfort level, and so not to get used to one level of intimacy. This builds their confidence over time, which reduces the

chance of them becoming abusive and out of control of their emotions later in life. Equally as important as instilling basic levels of respect and confidence within young children is educating young people about reproductive health, safe sex, and relationships, including education for non-cis/heterosexual people. The last solution is to educate every individual in ways to build up their confidence. Confident people are more likely to know how they are meant to be treated and are more likely to demand a healthy relationship or simply leave toxic and abusive situations. This means teaching girls about their reproductive biology (such as periods) so that they understand that their bodies are correct and normal. This type of education is lacking in many areas of the world, making women unsure of their own bodies because they don't fully understand the cycles they go through, therefore seeing themselves as disgusting or wrong for simply having a period. When a woman feels ashamed of her reproductive health, she is less likely to talk about it with the men in her life, which leads to the men agreeing with her that periods are gross and weird. Reproductive education gives girls the confidence and self-acceptance to demand to be treated equally if their partner is a man. It also leads to safer sex and therefore more equality and opportunities for women. Overall, relationships between two confident individuals work better because neither feels dependent on the other in an unhealthy amount, which means they are able to think more clearly and make decisions based on what's best for both of them, and not only one.

These are all long-term, large-scale solutions to a problem that is growing bigger every two minutes as one more woman gets raped (WCSAP). The dam isn't just leaking anymore, it's full on flooding and the victims' voices can't be heard over the crashing waves of men's rights activists screaming, "Not all men!" and the, "good religious people" throwing meaningless Bible verses saying "God has plan, and everything that happens is what He wants." The Battered Women's Movement is just barely treading water, and it can't keep up much longer. I have one more solution, but this one seems almost insignificant. Yet it's something each and every one of us can do. It isn't setting up giant rallies to raise awareness or getting a teaching degree, it's leading meaningful lives that condemn *any* form of emotional abuse. It's checking in on a friend when they look upset after they've spent time with their partner, and taking every complaint they have about their partner as seriously as you can. As important as it is to educate everyone, educating yourself is what leads to a ripple effect. Calling out even seemingly irrelevant actions that you know can later create an unhealthy atmosphere is more important than it seems. By being "that person" that other people may sometimes get annoyed at for being so picky over their romance movies shows the people around you that you are passionate about this, which can lead to someone feeling comfortable enough to come to you in their time of need.

And when they come to you, you simply must know what to do. Here are a few tips:

- Never give any sort of advice relating to what their next step should be or order them on what they should do. Give them all the options with all of the information that you know and let them decide. By deciding for them you might inadvertently:
 - Bring them back into a situation where they are dependent on someone else. As much as they might ask you to do this because "it's too hard" and "they just can't do it yet" this will only harm them more in the future
 - legally be held accountable. As much as you may want to help them out, you must look out for yourself as well.

- ❑ Make them as comfortable as you can. This means that if they get angry and curse and scream at you, take that as a good sign and don't get offended. Victims coming out of an emotionally or physically abusive relationship often have seemingly random breakdowns or fits of anger, and it is important to let them have the space to process without thinking about how it affects you too much.
- ❑ If they ask questions on your past relationships and if/how you'd deal with this, politely divert the conversation back to them. It is important for them to be able to focus on themselves because each situation is different.
- ❑ If they say they aren't ready, understand and be patient. Even if you may not want to, you may have to send them home to an unhealthy partner. However, going behind their back and doing something about the situation or refusing to let them return to their partner would:
 - ❑ Make you lose the most important part of the interaction: their trust. If they don't trust you won't make any progress.
 - ❑ Would once again turn the interaction in an imbalance of power, which is exactly what they are trying to leave.
- ❑ Always be completely honest with the victim, they *must* be able to trust you and that won't happen if you don't tell the truth 100%.
- ❑ If you are a mandated reporter, stop them if they are telling their story and they mention children. Mandated reporters have to report only about children, and so the whole situation changes when children are brought into the picture. Stop them and explain that you are required to report situations that involve anyone who is underage, and so they should only continue their story if they are comfortable. Never try to trick information out of them when they don't know that it will be reported.

A helpful tip to use when you are trying to actively listen to someone's story is to repeat the information back to them while paraphrasing and asking clarifying questions. This lets them know that you are engaged and are actively taking in the information, as well as helps them subconsciously understand the situation better for themselves and get their thoughts in order.

There is no truly right way to deal with a situation like this, because the whole case is just so wrong in itself. Throughout it all, there will be tears and anger and a whole mixture of emotions. But that's all just part of the process. It's normal to be sad to leave someone, even if that someone has treated you horribly in the past. It's also normal to still be in love with them, it's a chaotic kind of love though. It's completely normal to tell yourself that you're just going through a rough patch in the relationship, and that it'll get better. Every single emotion or thought that goes through your head is right, and suppressing an emotion because you think it's wrong is the only unhealthy thing you could do. Emotions aren't logical by their very nature. They happen and the healthiest thing you could do is let them pass through and rock you back into health. It's easier to forgive someone when you love them, and your abuser knows this.

Bibliography

- Meyer, Cathy. "Being Abused? This Checklist Will Help You Decide." *LiveAbout*,
www.liveabout.com/are-you-being-abused-this-checklist-will-help-you-decide-1102416.
- Steiner, Leslie Morgan. "Why Domestic Violence Victims Don't Leave." *TED*,
www.ted.com/talks/leslie_morgan_steiner_why_domestic_violence_victims_don_t_leave#t-590321
- Steyer, James P., and Chelsea Clinton. *Talking Back to Facebook: a Common Sense Guide to Raising Kids in the Digital Age*. Scribner, 2012
- "The Notebook." *Netflix*, 1 Mar. 2019,
<https://www.netflix.com/search?q=the%20notebook&jbv=60036227&jbp=0&jbr=0>
- Happily. "Preschoolers Choose Own Greeting to Start School Day." *YouTube*, YouTube, 28 Oct. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyLm0VeWUno>
- Stark, Cortlynn. "Domestic Violence rates Increase Nationally, Statewide." *The Standard*, 12 Feb 2018, www.the-standard.org/news/domestic-violence-rates-increase-nationally-statewide/article_e11db76e-105e-11e8-8efe-cbd3745a8e5b.html.
- Miedzian, Myriam. *Boys Will Be Boys*. Doubleday, 1991
- Cundiff, Gretchen. *The Influence of Rap/Hip-Hop Music: A Mixed-Method Analysis on Audience Perceptions of Misogynistic Lyrics and the Issue of Domestic Violence*. 19 Apr. 2019.
- Motley Crue - Live Wire. *Genius*. <https://genius.com/Motley-crue-live-wire-lyrics>