

Lifelong Unintentional Gaslighting Can Cause Complex PTSD In Autistic People



(A Comprehensive Guide for Neurotypicals)

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Introduction

Hello. I'm Jaime A. Heidel, The Articulate Autistic. I'm a late-diagnosed autistic woman who helps neurotypical people communicate more effectively with their autistic loved ones (and vice-versa). In this guide, I explain what gaslighting is, how it can be accidental on the part of neurotypical people, and how neurotypical people can prevent doing it to their loved ones.

If you are a neurotypical person with an autistic loved one, your everyday interactions with them may be causing them significant distress and could lead them to develop a mental health condition called complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

Even if you have absolutely no intention of causing any kind of harm to your neurodivergent loved one, you may be doing so unknowingly. I recommend reading this guide to educate yourself on the underlying cause of neurotypical-to-autistic miscommunication and how you can reduce it significantly so that you can communicate with one another without frustration and trauma.

For more information about how you can better understand and communicate with your autistic loved one, visit my website, www.thearticulateautistic.com.

What is Gaslighting?

From Wikipedia: *Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person or a group covertly sows seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or group, making them question their own memory, perception, or judgment.*

Gaslighting is one of the most insidious types of abuse as it essentially makes the person who is experiencing it drive themselves insane (in a sense). Or, to put it in better terms, they are continually manipulated by someone else into *thinking* they're insane.

When I say “insane”, I don’t mean having a mental illness. I mean *being driven by another human being into the deepest depths of man-made insanity by continually invalidating their experience of the world.* A person subjected to gaslighting may have had no prior history of mental illness, but this continual torture has changed both their psychological and physiological health to the point where they now have complex PTSD and other conditions that would be classified as mental illnesses.

Trigger Warning - Mention of Sewercide

Gaslighting is so horrible, it can cause a strong and mentally healthy person to become so distraught and confused that they take their own life. I cannot stress enough how damaging this form of abuse is.

Why am I talking about this? Because there is a unique phenomenon that occurs between neurotypical and autistic people, and that phenomenon is **unintentional gaslighting**.

This means that even if the neurotypical people who raised us, taught us, and cared for us, had absolutely no idea they were doing it, **they were slowly and systematically eroding our sanity**, bit by bit, piece by piece, until we either

died, ended up in a psychiatric ward, developed an addiction to drugs or alcohol, or struggled with such severe mental illness that it significantly impacted our lives to the point of interrupting function.

Autistics and Neurotypicals Speak Two Different Languages

So, how does this happen? How does a neurotypical parent who loves their autistic child and has no intention of abusing them in any way cause such psychological harm? How does a neurotypical partner who is deeply in love with their autistic spouse cause them to end up a puddle of anxiety, tears, and confusion on the floor?

The answer is, ironically, very simple: Autistic people and neurotypical people speak two different languages, but neither is aware of this fundamental fact, which leads to a lifetime of chronic misunderstandings, miscommunication, frustration, unmet needs, and extraordinary anxiety.

Furthermore, a lifetime of this kind of torment, unintentional though it may be, can lead to the development of complex PTSD.



My Story of Being Autistic With Complex PTSD

In February of 2021, my therapist officially diagnosed me with complex PTSD. I had a feeling for a couple of years that ordinary PTSD just didn't fit my list of traits and symptoms. When someone has post-traumatic stress disorder (which I was diagnosed with 6 years ago), it is usually because they've experienced *one* significantly traumatic event in their lives.

For example, the death of a loved one, a terrible car accident, a robbery, a near-death experience.

However, complex PTSD develops as a result of systematic abuse and torture. For example, being beaten, screamed at, neglected, misunderstood, bullied, and/or abused for several years or decades.

A person with complex PTSD has a nervous system that has re-wired itself to be in preparation for fight or flight every moment of their lives. Their bodies, their muscle memory, and their brains are primed to live in a dangerous world where their sanity and/or life could be in jeopardy at any moment.

Even if no abuse or torture has occurred in their lives in years, the body and brain are completely re-wired, and only intensive therapy can hope to undo the damage.

I have complex PTSD for several reasons:

1. I was abused and neglected as a child.
2. I was bullied mercilessly as a child by both children and adults.
3. I was abused in partner relationships as an adult.
4. I'm autistic living in a neurotypical world.

Even if I had never experienced child abuse, bullying, or partner abuse, I would still have complex PTSD simply for being autistic and living in a neurotypical world.

Why?

It is my firm belief that anyone who was late-diagnosed as autistic who had families, teachers, and peers who didn't understand their natural neurological differences, were traumatized because of how neurotypical people responded to their innate behavior and traits.

As autistic people, we didn't even have to experience outright abuse, bullying, or neglect. It was enough just to live in a world where we felt, deep in our bones, that we didn't fit in, that we couldn't make our bodies and brains do what others wanted them to do, that we just didn't understand what we had "done wrong" socially, and that our very being was a frustrating nuisance to others.



Those facts, in and of themselves, are more than enough for any autistic person to develop complex PTSD.

What Exactly Is Unintentional Gaslighting?

When you say “unintentional gaslighting”, it can come across as absurd to some and downright insulting to others. After all, how can someone unintentionally emotionally destroy a person? Am I victim-blaming? Taking the side of the abuser?

No, not at all.

When I was younger, I fully and wholeheartedly (well, let’s face it broken-heartedly) believed that the entire world, save a few people, was horribly abusive. The whole damned human race. I wasn’t one of those autistics who thought *I* was the problem and internalized it, **I thought everyone else was *stark-raving mad***, and I love myself for that fact.

Had I not felt that way, arrogant as it came across at the time, I may not be who I am today. I may not have thought to question every tiny little thing until I was able to somehow not only figure out **there was a neurological language barrier** but learn how to translate autistic to neurotypical and vice-versa!

Were some people purposefully abusing me? Absolutely, yes. Were many people traumatizing me without having any clue they were doing it? Also, yes.

It took decades for me to sort out the actual, purposeful abuse I went through and the unintentional psychological harm inflicted upon me by those who simply couldn’t make sense of me.

I went from “every neurotypical is abusive” (which many, many neuro-divergent people still think and feel and with justification) to “holy crap, we speak two different languages”. It’s been an amazing journey since then. Not seeing the entire human race as out to get me is quite refreshing and calming and gives me the perspective I need to help neurotypical people communicate more effectively with their autistic loved ones and vice-versa.

Examples of Unintentional Gaslighting By Neurotypicals of Neurodivergents

OK, here come the examples (one of my favorite ways to write and relate and help NTs and NDs understand each other better):

Example 1 - “Hi”

Marta is autistic. She’s 25 and works as a data entry specialist for an insurance firm. Her usual routine consists of coming into work, sitting in her cubicle, doing her work, taking her break to eat lunch in her car, and going home. That’s it. No fuss, no muss.



However, Marta doesn’t know she’s autistic. She’s never been diagnosed.

Even though Marta has only been working at the insurance firm for a month, and she’s had little to no contact with her co-workers outside of short, work-related conversations, she’s already been given labels such as “stuck up”, “rude”, “snobby”, “entitled”, and a “bitch”.

Her neurotypical co-workers have not only been talking about Marta behind her back, they’ve also been giving her dirty looks, messing up her neat, ordered workspace, and blaming her for things going missing from the cafeteria fridge. What’s more, Marta can just *feel* how disliked she is, it hangs over her like a thick layer of humidity, and it confuses and distresses her.

Marta finally goes to her boss in tears about how her coworkers have been treating her, but instead of support, her boss tells her that they are doing those things because Marta never says “Hi” to anyone or tries to have a conversation with them. She doesn’t go to any events and “can’t even be bothered to look at people when they talk to her”.

Marta is in a state of shock. “*Hi*”? *Wait. What?* “*Hi??*” She’s being mistreated by her adult coworkers because she doesn’t engage in idle chit-chat with them? Was that part of the job description??

You might wonder, “Wait, what’s unintentional about that?? Marta’s coworkers are obviously bullying her!”

Yes, they are. But here’s the unintentional part: Marta’s boss incorrectly assumes that Marta’s behavior is **purposeful snobbishness** and that she should know that her neurotypical coworkers are going to take that as a threat to their established community and bully her for it to make her conform to their ideal of how she should behave.

Marta, being autistic, would *never* understand the concept of social hierarchy or neurotypical communication expectations. It would never occur to her to say “Hi” to her coworkers just for the sake of it. Why? What would be the point?

Again, what Marta’s neurotypical coworkers are doing *is* bullying, no question, but the intention behind it is to either crowd Marta out of their group because they see her as different and therefore suspect or get Marta to change the way she acts around them by seeing the “error of her ways” through bullying.

The intention was *not* to drive Marta into the nearest psychiatric unit because she was unable to even fathom that a lack of “Hi” could be seen as a threat, but that’s exactly what could happen.

Example 2 - “On Purpose”

Elijah is 8, autistic, but undiagnosed. His parents see him as an odd combination of shy, clumsy, and rude. They love him, they want what’s best for him, and they take care of his needs as well as they can, but they are very concerned about what life is going to be like for him when he grows up because he seems to be so different from other kids. They don’t *want* him to be different, they want him to be like his peers, so he has a “real shot in life”.

Elijah lives in a house filled with breakable knick-knacks, an absolute horror story for anyone who struggles with proprioception. On the regular, Elijah knocks glass picture frames, vases, or figurines onto the floor, and they shatter into a million pieces.



Each time this happens, Elijah’s parents take a “privilege” away from him to “teach him a lesson in responsibility”. So far, they have taken away his video games, his music, his fidget cube, and his collection of stuffed animals, but nothing seems to work. If anything, Elijah is just knocking over more stuff! Grounding him doesn’t work, talking to him doesn’t work, reasoning with him doesn’t work, even *yelling* doesn’t work!

At this point, Elijah’s functioning is deteriorating, but his parents mistakenly see this behavior as willful and purposeful. He’s starting to become violent and destructive, and his ability to communicate his needs through speech is becoming nearly non-existent. To add insult to injury, they are now telling him that if he’s going to “pretend he can’t talk”, then he won’t be able to have what he’s been frantically pointing to and crying for.

Any autistic person reading this is probably cringing from traumatic memories, and I apologize for that. For us, the solution is simple: Put the

knick-knacks away! For neurotypical people, it's not a conclusion they may come to.

After all, neurotypical people don't struggle with proprioception issues and cannot even fathom how a healthy-appearing 8-year-old child could possibly knock over so many objects by mistake. It HAS to be on purpose, it HAS to be to get attention because, in their minds and experience, there is just no other reason for it.

Elijah's parents are trying to discipline him, teach him respect for the property of others, and show him that his behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated by the wide world.

What they don't understand is that they are not disciplining him or teaching him anything, they are gaslighting his mental health right into the ground!

Example 3 - "All About You"

Tracy is autistic, 32 years old, undiagnosed. Her friend, Aubrey, is 34, neurotypical. They met at a church function 2 years ago and have been casual friends since. They're not particularly close, but they know each other well enough and, for the most part, get along.

Recently, Aubrey has been going through a rough time. Her 6-year-old daughter is sick, but the doctors can't seem to figure out what's wrong with her. They've run test after test, but everything comes back negative. She confides this in Tracy one day at breakfast after church.



Tracy and Aubrey don't usually go to breakfast together, so this is a new experience for Tracy as far as this friendship goes. However, she was invited, and, **as her therapist and parents have been drilling into her head since she was a child**, she believes she must “make an effort” and “put herself out there”.

Even though Tracy is tired from the overwhelming empathetic feelings she had during her pastor's earlier heartfelt sermon, and the restaurant is quite crowded and noisy, Tracy is hanging in there while Aubrey explains her situation with her daughter.

While Aubrey speaks, she notices Tracy continually glancing away and looking at other people or objects and appearing to not pay attention to what Aubrey is saying. Tracy surprises Aubrey by saying not only did she hear her, but she understands and has some suggestions for her.

Tracy explains that when she was a little girl, she had the same symptoms Aubrey's daughter has; chronic fatigue, stomach pain, itchy rashes that seem to come from nowhere, and irritability. Tracy gives a lengthy explanation to Aubrey about the symptoms she experienced and all of the doctor visits she made in her own childhood.

Aubrey is offended that Tracy has turned the conversation around to herself and her own symptoms. That's not what Aubrey needs right now!

Before Tracy can come to her point and explain that she believes that Aubrey's daughter may have undiagnosed celiac disease, as she does, Aubrey speaks up and accuses Tracy of not only being distracted and not listening but making the entire conversation about her!

The breakfast ends abruptly when Aubrey puts her half of the cost of the bill on the table and storms out. Tracy manages to hold it together until she gets in the car but sobs all the way home because yet another friendship has mysteriously ended, and she doesn't know why. All Tracy wants to do is help that little girl because she went through the same thing, but something unidentifiable to Tracy made Aubrey mad, and now they aren't speaking anymore.

The unintentional gaslighting, in this case, is Aubrey's reaction to Tracy speaking up about her own experiences. Tracy was attempting to relate to what Aubrey's daughter was going through by explaining her own experiences and offering suggestions to help (as autistics tend to do, this is our love language), but Aubrey, being neurotypical and already stressed about her daughter's health, took Tracy gazing around the room and talking about herself as disinterest and selfishness.

Aubrey is confused and frustrated that she's not being listened to. Tracy is devastated because her friendship with Aubrey appears to have come to a sudden end with no understandable reason behind it, and this incident reminds Tracy of all the other times friendships have "mysteriously" ended with no explanation.

Aubrey intended to vent her frustration and get Tracy to "pay attention to her" in a neurotypical way. She wasn't intending to cause psychological harm or trigger Tracy into re-living terrible memories, but that's what ended up happening anyway.

Example 4 - "A Sensory Nightmare"

Ralph is 6, autistic, undiagnosed. He has lived with his mother and older brother since his father passed away. Ralph's older brother, Robert, loves jamming out on his guitar in his bedroom, talking loudly on video chat to his friends, and watching movies at full volume. Ralph, who has a bedroom right next to his, cannot stand this constant noise.



He often pounds on Robert's wall and tells him to stop being so loud, but his brother ignores him. After all, their mom said it's not too loud for her, so what is Ralph complaining about? He's just overly sensitive. He won't make it in the world that way, their mother thinks.

Seeing that Ralph seems to have an intolerance to not only the noises his brother makes but even traffic noises such as honking cars and radios playing inside them, his mother continually tells him to stop covering his ears and “get used to” the sound.

She even takes him to a doctor who does exposure therapy to try to get Ralph to become more used to everyday noises. For months, Ralph would scream, cry, and cover his ears when exposed to the sounds, but now, he just sits and stares into space.

He doesn’t complain much about the noise anymore, but he has also stopped speaking and engaging with his mother and brother. He sleeps all the time and is prone to breaking down into tears easily. His grades are failing. But he doesn’t seem to be affected by the loud sounds anymore.

The unintentional gaslighting here is that Ralph’s mother believed exposure therapy would be good for her son so he could function better in the “real world”. She sees him no longer complaining as success, when, in fact, he’s completely disassociated from reality to protect himself and is now spiraling into depression.

Mom wanted to help her son but only succeeded in psychologically damaging him.

Example 5 - “Accidental Flirt”

Melinda and Aniyah are both 30, Melinda is an undiagnosed autistic, Aniyah is neurotypical. They’ve been dating for a year. Their relationship has been rocky because they seem to struggle to communicate and understand each other.

Aniyah can’t understand how Melinda seems confused about even the most



“basic” social cues, and she’s starting to believe that her girlfriend is just messing with her mind. After all, she’s had bad relationships in the past, this is probably just another one in a repeating pattern.

Melinda, for her part, feels like Aniyah is pulling away, becoming distant. Melinda doesn’t feel the same close energy she once felt with her partner, and she’s wondering if this one is going to leave, too, as they all have in the past.

One day, Melinda and Aniyah are sitting at a doctor’s office, waiting for Aniyah to get called in for a minor medical procedure. Melinda is deeply engrossed in her phone, as she usually is in public places, she’s sitting next to Aniyah, but she’s careful not to touch her or act affectionately towards her.

This is because, at the beginning of their relationship, Aniyah explained to Melinda that she didn’t feel comfortable being obvious about their relationship because they both lived in a section of town that was not kind to same-sex couples.

Since Aniyah is Melinda’s first same-sex relationship, Melinda has no experience with the prejudice LGBTQ people face in this part of town. (Melinda also wouldn’t notice if an elephant walked into a room and did the waltz, as she never really notices much of the outside world or makes connections to it, as none of it has made sense to her since childhood).

Across the room, an attractive, masculine-presenting woman begins chatting with the couple. She looks Melinda up and down, smiles at her, and turns her feet and body to face only Melinda rather than both of them. Aniyah immediately notices that this woman is flirting openly with her girlfriend, but Melinda doesn’t seem to be rebuffing her advances. Aniyah can’t believe that Melinda isn’t holding her hand or in some way indicating that she and Aniyah are a couple!

When they get back into the car after Aniyah’s visit, Aniyah expresses her annoyance and frustration and asks Melinda why she was flirting with that other woman. Melinda has absolutely no idea what her partner is talking about. *Flirting?* That other woman was talking about old movies, not sex and relationships! There was no winking or asking for phone numbers. What the

heck was Aniyah talking about? Aniyah cannot believe her partner actually didn't see the flirting that was going on or that she was doing it back. She then asks Melinda why she didn't hold her hand or indicate in any way that they were together.

Melinda turns white as a sheet and nearly passes out from the force of the shock she feels. When she can find her voice to speak again, she shakily reminds her partner that Aniyah had expressly told her *not* to show affection to her in public because of the way their town views same-sex couples.

Aniyah is ready to explode. *Obviously*, she meant when they were out on the street or in a grocery store or movie theater among straight people, not when Melinda was being so *obviously* hit on by another member of the LGBTQ community!

When Aniyah says as much, Melinda bursts into tears, sobbing quietly all the way home, at a complete loss as to what's going on or what's truly expected of her.

Melinda breaks up with Aniyah soon after that, citing too many misunderstandings. Aniyah secretly believes that Melinda is leaving her for that other woman while Melinda has decided to give up on relationships and spend the rest of her life alone.

The unintentional gaslighting in this is that Aniyah was expressing her feelings of being mistreated by her partner "openly flirting" with another woman. She wanted her partner to know that her behavior had hurt her. She intended to get answers and reassurance from Melinda, not make her doubt her own sanity, end the relationship and decide to spend the rest of her life single, but that's what happened.

Note: This one actually happened to me, almost verbatim. I just changed the names and situation. It was just as painful and confusing for me at the time as it was for my fictitious character, Melinda.

How to Stop Unintentionally Gaslighting Your Autistic Loved Ones and Friends

Now that you can see how confusing and psychologically damaging these misunderstandings can be, you'll likely want to know how you can prevent causing harm in the future.

I'll give you some tips:

1. Learn about the autistic brain.

The first step to understanding your autistic loved one and reducing these PTSD-inducing misunderstandings is to learn about the autistic brain. Immerse yourself in it. Read my blog, read books, join forums and groups geared towards bridging the gap between autistic people and their loved ones. Absorb as much as you can.

Here is a list of books I recommend you start with:

- [Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World that Wasn't Designed for You](#)
- [NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity](#)
- [Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism](#)

2. Assume good intentions.

Most autistic people are honest, sensitive, and caring, and have difficulty even *understanding* purposeful cruelty. This means we are *less* likely to try to hurt someone else's feelings on purpose, not *more* likely. For this, always assume good intentions. If your autistic loved one has said or done a thing you feel is hurtful, resist the urge to react with a strong emotional response toward the autistic person. More likely than not, it's just a misunderstanding, not malice.

3. Communicate clearly and directly.

The best way to communicate with most autistic people is by being clear and direct. We don't take "hints", we don't read social cues very well, and facial expressions and body language are often a total mystery to us.

If you're offended by something, tell us. Be clear about what we did or said, why it was offensive to you, and then work to reach a compromise about how to deal with the misunderstanding and prevent future miscommunications about the same topic.

Also, ***don't let your feelings fester for months***. That will greatly increase the chances of you exploding on the autistic person, who had no idea you were even upset until that very moment. Those types of reactions are very confusing and traumatizing for us, and we don't learn anything other than to be afraid of and avoid others.

4. Check for understanding.

When communicating needs, expectations, and instructions, check for understanding on the part of your autistic loved one. Ask them what they understood about your request. You'll often find that what you think you're communicating clearly and effectively is still lost on your autistic loved one. Not because we are slow, but because we experience and interpret the world

differently. Check for understanding before assuming you're both on the same page.

5. Answer every single question, especially “why”.

I can't speak for all autistic people, but I believe a good many of us learn by asking questions. A neurotypical person may give a brief rundown of something, and their neurotypical friends and family will understand it because their brains will “fill in the blanks” and understand all the subtle nuances. Not us.

Autistic people need details, details, details.

Also, “why” is not a question of your authority or an attempt to engage in a power struggle. “Why” simply means “I need more information”. We need to understand why we are doing something (or not doing it) to make sense of what you're asking and remember to do it. Answering the question “why” helps us achieve understanding. It may seem unnecessary to you, but it's **everything** to us.

Being told I couldn't ask questions or being admonished for asking them made much of the world inaccessible to me. It made it a dark, confusing, and scary place where people had expectations of me, but I was supposed to “just know”.

I was not only punished and excluded for not knowing, I also was forbidden to ask questions, so I couldn't learn anyway, and that was the ultimate in unintentional gaslighting for me.

“Do this.”

“I don't know how.”

“Of course you do, everybody does. Do this.”

“Why?”

“How dare you ask me why! I am your elder, you will do as I say!”

“But, I don’t understand what you say!”

“Don’t take that tone with me! Do this.”

“But, WHY am I doing this?”

“Because I said so!”

“But, I don’t know HOW?!”

“That’s it, you’re losing your privileges!”

“But, if you just explained--”

“You should just know! I’m sick of you. Get out of my sight!”

Imagine living every day like that, day in and day out. Wouldn’t you feel like you needed a long nap in a padded cell?

Yeah. Me, too.

I think complex PTSD can be prevented in autistic people, but neurotypical people have to be willing to meet us halfway.

Thanks for reading! For more information about understanding your autistic loved one, visit my website, www.thearticulateautistic.com.



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