When Therapy Language Becomes a Weapon

How words like gaslighting, boundaries, narcissism, and emotional safety can clarify a conflict or replace the examination of what actually happened

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You tried to explain what happened.

You were told you were being defensive.

You asked for a specific example.

You were told that asking for examples was proof that you refuse to take accountability.

Now you have a problem: defending yourself seems to prove the accusation, but accepting the accusation means agreeing with something you may not believe is true.

If you've been in a conversation like that, you know how disorienting it can become.

Men sometimes come into my office after being called controlling, narcissistic, manipulative, emotionally unavailable, or a gaslighter. Those concerns are not automatically dishonest or unfair. Sometimes there is real behavior underneath those words that a man needs to face. Sometimes the labels distract from the evidence. Often there is some of both.

My first job isn't to decide who is right.

It's to figure out what actually happened.

If someone is afraid of you, the first thing to examine is your behavior, not their vocabulary.

Therapy has given us useful language for understanding difficult experiences. Words like boundaries, trauma, validation, gaslighting, and emotional safety can help someone recognize something they have never been able to describe.

The problem isn't therapy language.

The problem begins when an interpretation gets treated like the word of God.

A psychological term should give us something to look at.

Just because someone uses a psychological term doesn't mean they have accurately described what happened.

Bring Me an Actual Moment

If you tell me: "My wife says I'm controlling."

I'm probably going to ask:

- Give me a specific example.
- What happened?
- What did you say?
- What did she say?
- What happened immediately before it?
- What happened next?
- What would a camera have recorded?

I'm not here to protect you from the possibility that you were controlling. I'm also not going to assume you were because somebody used the word.

We can examine it.

Maybe you demanded access to her phone. Maybe you tried to dictate who she could see. Maybe you threatened financial consequences if she didn't do what you wanted.

Those would be important facts.

But maybe you disagreed with her. Maybe you asked a question she didn't like. Maybe you expressed a preference. Maybe there is a complicated history that doesn't fit neatly into either person's description.

Those are facts worth examining too.

This is one of the basic principles behind how I work:

Observation before interpretation.

Move from the label to an actual event. From identity to behavior. From certainty to evidence.

Then we have something we can actually work with.

The Same Standard Applies to You

This only works if the same standard applies to you. Have you threatened them, intimidated them, controlled their money, or tried to isolate them from other people? Arguing over the label won't undo those actions. If you ask, "What specifically did I do?" you have to be willing to hear the answer.

Maybe you really did threaten someone.

Maybe you repeatedly denied something that happened. Maybe the boundary was clearly communicated and you ignored it. Maybe what you call "explaining yourself" is actually a pattern of never acknowledging your impact. Maybe you are focusing so intensely on an unfair accusation that you are avoiding the part that rings true.

Then specificity has done its job.

Specificity isn't a defense. It is a way to reality test what happened, and it only works if you're willing to be changed by the answer.

Consider: “You’re gaslighting me.”

Gaslighting is a real thing. It involves a pattern of trying to distort or destabilize another person’s understanding of reality. Two people remembering an event differently, disagreeing about what happened, or interpreting the same event differently is not automatically gaslighting.

How Frame Capture Happens

A conversation can become self-sealing when a psychological description starts deciding what every response means.

You remember an event differently than your wife, only to be accused of gaslighting. When you try to explain your side, you’re told you are being defensive or invalidating her feelings. And the more you try to explain yourself, the more convinced they become that they’re right.

I think of this as frame capture: one person’s interpretation becomes the story the entire conversation has to occur within.

The person may genuinely believe what they’re saying. That doesn’t make it accurate. If every explanation or disagreement becomes further proof they’re right, there’s no room left to question the conclusion.

Imagine a woman tells her husband she’s stuck at work and asks him to take care of something. Later, he discovers she wasn’t actually at work.

The husband says, “I would have helped you anyway. You didn’t have to tell me you were at work. I’m upset because you weren’t honest with me.”

The response is, “Why do you need to know where I am? You’re controlling.”

Notice what happened. The original issue was that someone lied about being at work. Now the conversation is about whether their partner is controlling.

Those are not the same question.

There may genuinely be controlling behavior elsewhere in the relationship. That deserves examination too. But it still doesn’t answer the original question.

Trying to return to the original issue can now become evidence against you: “I don’t need to know where you went. I’m asking why you said you were at work when you weren’t.”

“You’re still trying to control me.”

Now the frame is difficult to escape because disputing it appears to confirm it.

A better move is to go back to what actually happened.

What actually happened?

Boundaries Can Clarify or Hide the Issue

Consider: “Why won’t you respect my boundaries?”

There may be a legitimate boundary being violated. But notice how much that question can assume before anything has been established.

- Was there a clearly communicated boundary?
- What exactly was this boundary?
- What behavior crossed it?
- Was the boundary about what the person would do, or was it actually a rule governing what somebody else was allowed to do?

A healthy boundary might sound like:

“If you start yelling at me, I’m going to end the conversation and we can try again later.”

That’s different from:

“My boundary is that you’re not allowed to disagree with me about this.”

Asking what a boundary actually is does not attack the idea of boundaries. It makes the word specific enough to be useful.

Emotional Safety Deserves Attention, Not Automatic Conclusions

The same problem can happen with the language of safety.

There is a difference between “I don’t feel emotionally safe having this conversation” and “You are making me unsafe.”

The first describes an internal experience. The second also makes a claim about another person’s behavior and responsibility.

Sometimes the connection is obvious. Someone is threatening, screaming, intimidating, blocking an exit, destroying property, or behaving violently.

Sometimes the connection is not obvious. Someone can experience criticism, disagreement, uncertainty, or conflict as deeply threatening because of previous experiences. Sometimes the person across from them really is behaving dangerously.

When someone says they feel unsafe, the immediate priority does not have to be figuring out which explanation is correct. Pausing the conversation may be entirely appropriate.

Pausing is not conceding.

You can take someone’s experience of danger seriously without deciding the entire meaning of the interaction in that second. The factual question can wait until people are able to examine it safely.

Real abuse, intimidation, coercive control, and violence do exist. Psychological language should help identify those behaviors accurately, not make careful examination of them a “boundary violation.” Reality testing also cannot become a demand that a frightened person prove their fear to you. Repeatedly demanding examples, disputing every example, or refusing to let a conversation end can become its own form of pressure.

Feelings Are Real. Their Explanations Can Still Be Examined

Just because someone feels rejected does not mean they were rejected. The same goes for feeling controlled or unsafe. Sometimes those feelings are a reasonable response to what's actually happening. Other times, past experiences or personal insecurities can affect how someone interprets the situation.

Of course, someone can also be dishonest about what they're feeling. Just because a person says they feel hurt, controlled, or unsafe doesn't automatically establish that they do.

When someone genuinely experiences those feelings, the feelings are real, but their explanation for their feelings can still be examined. What happened, what contributed to the feeling, and what responsibility belongs to each person are separate questions. Fear in response to your behavior is information even when you did not intend to frighten someone. This distinction becomes particularly important around validation.

"I believe that hurt you."

does not necessarily mean:

"Your explanation of why I did it is correct."

Validation means taking someone's experience seriously. It doesn't require surrendering your own perception of reality.

Psychological Mind Reading

Therapy language can also give us tremendous confidence about things we cannot directly observe.

- "You only did that because you're insecure."
- "You're projecting."
- "You're afraid of intimacy."
- "You're trying to control me."
- "You're threatened by my independence."
- "You wouldn't be so upset if it wasn't true."

The more confidently someone claims to know what's happening inside another person's mind, the more important it becomes to examine what they are basing that conclusion on.

Any of those interpretations could be correct. They could also be wrong.

The problem starts when a guess about someone's internal state gets treated as a fact.

Now the accused person has to disprove someone else's theory about what is happening inside their mind.

"The fact that you don't realize you're doing it proves my point."

Now both agreement and disagreement support the theory. There is no way to test it.

A useful question is:

“Is there even a 1% chance that you’re wrong?”

If someone can’t even consider the possibility that they’re wrong, how are you supposed to have an honest discussion about what happened?

Another question is:

What evidence would make you revise your interpretation?

If the answer is “nothing,” we may no longer be examining a hypothesis. The interpretation may have become self-sealing.

Explanation Is Not Exoneration

Therapy language can also be used to protect ourselves.

- “I didn’t lie. I had a trauma response.”
- “I wasn’t avoiding you. I was protecting my peace.”
- “I ghosted because my nervous system needed safety.”
- “My attachment style made me pull away.”
- “I don’t owe you an explanation. That’s my boundary.”
- “If you were emotionally secure, my behavior wouldn’t bother you.”
- “I said those things because I was emotionally dysregulated.”

Maybe the explanation is completely accurate. But an explanation can be accurate and still not justify the behavior.

There is still another question:

What responsibility remains yours?

“I was triggered” may help explain why I screamed. I still screamed.

“My childhood taught me to withdraw during conflict” may explain why I disappeared for three days after an argument. The other person still experienced me disappearing for three days.

“I needed to set a boundary” may explain why I ended a conversation. It doesn’t automatically justify insulting someone before walking away.

Understanding why you did something does not remove the need to own what you did. Therapy should make room for both.

Don’t Fight Therapy Language With More Therapy Language

When someone uses psychological language against you, firing another diagnosis back usually makes things worse.

- “You’re projecting.”
- “No, you’re gaslighting me.”
- “You’re the narcissist.”
- “You’re invalidating my reality.”

Now both people are diagnosing each other and the original event has disappeared.

Don't answer one label with another. Go back to the event.

Before you ask these questions of someone else, ask them of yourself. They aren't demands the other person has to answer.

If someone says, "You're gaslighting me," try: "What specifically did I say that you believe was false or distorted?"

If someone says, "You're violating my boundaries," try: "What specifically are you asking me to do or stop doing?"

If someone says, "You're trying to control me," try: "What did I do that felt controlling?"

If someone says, "You're being defensive," try: "Maybe I am. What specifically am I saying that you believe is incorrect?"

These aren't counterattacks. They only work when there is genuine curiosity and enough calm for both people to participate.

The goal isn't to cross-examine somebody until their argument collapses. The goal is to find something concrete enough that both people can examine it.

A Six-Question Reality Check

When psychological language begins taking over a conflict, I often find some version of these questions useful:

1. What specifically happened?
2. What would a camera have recorded?
3. What part is observation, and what part is interpretation?
4. What story am I telling myself about the other person's motive, and what evidence supports it?
5. What evidence would make me revise my conclusion?
6. What responsibility remains mine even if my explanation is completely true?

You don't need to run through all six questions in the middle of an argument. Sometimes one is enough: What actually happened?

What This Looks Like in Therapy

If you tell me your wife called you a narcissist, I'm going to ask what happened. If you tell me she's manipulating you, I'm going to ask the same question.

Maybe you're accepting responsibility for something that isn't your fault. Maybe you're defending behavior you need to own. Sometimes both are happening.

We'll slow it down enough to look at what happened, what each of you did, what each of you inferred, and what responsibility actually belongs to you.

I don’t think therapy requires choosing between taking your experience seriously and challenging your interpretation of it. We can do both.

What Therapy Language Is For

Words like trauma, gaslighting, boundaries, validation, narcissism, and emotional safety exist because they can describe important human experiences.

We shouldn’t stop using them. We should expect more from them.

Useful psychological language should help us understand what actually happened. It should help us separate facts from assumptions, feelings from conclusions, and explanations from excuses. Most importantly, it should help us recognize what we’re responsible for and what we’re not.

When a psychological label makes those distinctions impossible, something has gone wrong. The Six-Question Reality Check comes back to the same place: before deciding what category someone belongs in, get specific about what happened.

Don’t tell me what category I’m in yet. Tell me what I did.

Therapy That Starts With What Actually Happened

I work with men, young adults, and older teen boys dealing with difficult relationships, divorce, anger, shame, anxiety, and patterns they haven’t been able to change. My approach is direct and practical. We can take your experience seriously without assuming your interpretation is automatically right or automatically wrong.

If this way of working makes sense to you, you can learn more about the McInnis Method or schedule a consultation with McInnis Mental Health.

Note: Examples in this article are illustrative composites rather than accounts of a specific client. This article is educational and isn’t a substitute for individualized mental health, legal, or safety guidance. If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services or an appropriate crisis or domestic violence resource.