



MANIPULATION TACTICS

A Printable Guide to Terms, Definitions, and Real-Life Examples

Important: A single behavior does not automatically prove manipulation or establish a diagnosis. Look for repeated patterns, power imbalances, lack of accountability, and the effect on your autonomy, safety, and trust in yourself.

This guide is educational and is not a substitute for individualized mental-health, medical, or legal advice.

How to Use This Guide

- Notice patterns rather than isolated mistakes. Healthy people may become defensive or communicate poorly at times; manipulation is more concerning when the behavior is repeated, strategic, coercive, or never genuinely repaired.
- Focus on impact and function. Ask: What does this behavior accomplish? Does it confuse me, silence me, isolate me, make me responsible for their choices, or pressure me to surrender a boundary?
- Document concrete behavior. Record dates, exact words, decisions, financial actions, and observable consequences rather than relying only on labels.

Terms and Examples

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE BEHAVIOR
Gaslighting	Repeatedly denying, distorting, or rewriting another person's reality so they begin to doubt their memory, perception, or judgment.	After saying something hurtful, the person insists, 'That never happened. You are imagining things,' even when messages or witnesses confirm it.
DARVO	A response pattern meaning Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender. The person accused of harm denies it, attacks the person raising the concern, and portrays themselves as the true victim.	When confronted about lying, they say, 'I did not lie. You are paranoid and cruel for accusing me. I am the one being mistreated here.'
Blame Shifting	Redirecting responsibility for one's behavior onto someone else.	'I only yelled because you pushed me too far.'
Projection	Attributing one's own motives, feelings, or behavior to another person.	A person who is hiding messages repeatedly accuses their partner of being secretive or unfaithful.
Rewriting History	Changing the story of past events to avoid accountability, preserve an image, or confuse the other person.	They later claim an agreement was never made, despite earlier texts showing it clearly.

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Minimization	Reducing the seriousness of harmful behavior or its impact.	‘It was just a joke. You are making a big deal out of nothing.’
Invalidation	Dismissing, mocking, or denying another person’s feelings, needs, or experience.	‘You have no reason to be upset. You are too sensitive.’
Emotional Withholding	Deliberately withholding affection, reassurance, attention, or communication to punish or control.	They become cold and unresponsive after the other person sets a boundary, then warm up only when they get their way.
Silent Treatment	Refusing normal communication as punishment, intimidation, or leverage rather than taking a respectful pause.	They ignore calls and messages for days after disagreement but continue interacting normally with everyone else.
Stonewalling	Shutting down discussion, refusing to engage, or blocking resolution when an important concern is raised.	They walk away, stare at a phone, or repeat ‘I am not talking about this’ whenever accountability is requested.
Intermittent Reinforcement	Alternating warmth, affection, approval, or rewards with rejection, criticism, or withdrawal, creating confusion and a powerful attachment to unpredictable positive moments.	After days of hostility, they suddenly become loving and attentive, then withdraw again without explanation.
Love Bombing	Using intense attention, praise, gifts, promises, or rapid intimacy to create attachment or obligation, often early in a relationship or after conflict.	They declare that you are their soulmate within days and make sweeping promises before trust has had time to develop.
Future Faking	Making convincing promises about a shared future to secure cooperation, loyalty, money, sex, or patience without genuine follow-through.	They repeatedly promise counseling, marriage, a move, or financial change whenever the relationship is at risk, but take no meaningful steps.
Breadcrumbing	Offering small, inconsistent amounts of attention or hope to keep someone emotionally invested without providing real commitment or change.	They send affectionate messages after long absences but avoid clear plans or accountability.
Hoovering	Attempting to pull someone back into a relationship or dynamic after separation, distance, or boundary-setting.	They suddenly send nostalgic messages, apologies, gifts, or claims of crisis after the other person begins moving on.
Triangulation	Bringing a third person into a conflict or relationship dynamic to create jealousy, rivalry, pressure, or validation.	‘Everyone agrees you are impossible,’ or comparing a partner unfavorably with an ex.
Smear Campaign	Spreading distorted, selective, or false stories to damage another person’s credibility and control how others perceive the conflict.	They tell family and friends that the other person is unstable while omitting their own threatening or deceptive behavior.
Character Assassination	Attacking a person’s identity, morality, competence, or sanity instead of addressing the specific issue.	A request to discuss finances is answered with, ‘You have always been selfish and irresponsible.’
Moving the Goalposts	Changing expectations or standards after they have been met so the other person can never succeed.	After asking for proof, they dismiss the proof and demand a different kind, then another.
Double Bind	Creating a situation in which every available choice can be criticized or punished.	They demand honesty, then retaliate when the person answers honestly; staying quiet is also labeled dishonest.

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Double Standard	Applying one set of rules to oneself and a stricter or contradictory set to others.	They insist on privacy for their messages while demanding full access to someone else's phone.
Word Salad	Using circular, contradictory, irrelevant, or overly complicated language to exhaust, confuse, or derail a conversation.	A simple question about a broken agreement becomes a long argument about unrelated events, tone, childhood, and imagined motives.
Deflection	Redirecting attention away from the issue being discussed.	When asked why they missed an obligation, they switch to criticizing the other person's housekeeping.
Whataboutism	Avoiding accountability by immediately pointing to another person's alleged wrongdoing.	'What about the time you were late three years ago?'
False Equivalence	Treating two actions as equally harmful when they differ significantly in intent, frequency, or impact.	Equating one frustrated comment with a long pattern of threats and intimidation.
Plausible Deniability	Behaving in a way that causes harm while preserving an explanation that makes the behavior appear accidental or innocent.	They 'forget' only the commitments that benefit the other person, then claim it was an innocent oversight.
Selective Memory	Claiming not to remember events, agreements, or statements when remembering would require accountability.	They recall every detail supporting their position but cannot remember the promise they made.
Feigning Confusion	Pretending not to understand a straightforward request or boundary in order to delay, frustrate, or avoid compliance.	A clear request not to discuss adult conflict with the children is met with repeated questions about what exactly that could possibly mean.
Weaponized Incompetence	Pretending to be unable to perform a task adequately so someone else will take over responsibility.	They repeatedly do a household or parenting task so poorly that the other person stops asking them to do it.
Boundary Testing	Pushing small limits to see what will be tolerated before escalating.	After being asked not to enter without notice, they begin with minor 'accidental' intrusions and gradually become more intrusive.
Boundary Punishment	Retaliating after someone says no, asks for respect, or establishes a limit.	After a boundary is set, they withdraw money, affection, access, cooperation, or social approval.
Coercive Control	A pattern of domination using intimidation, isolation, monitoring, financial control, threats, rules, or punishment to reduce another person's autonomy.	They control transportation, money, communications, friendships, and daily decisions while framing it as protection or concern.
Financial Abuse	Using money, debt, employment, property, or access to resources to control, exploit, or trap another person.	They restrict access to accounts, conceal assets, sabotage employment, or threaten to withhold essential support.
Isolation	Reducing a person's access to friends, family, work, community, information, or independent support.	They criticize every friend, create conflict before family visits, or make socializing feel too costly.

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Monitoring and Surveillance	Tracking communications, location, devices, spending, or social activity in a controlling way.	They demand passwords, inspect call logs, or use location sharing to interrogate ordinary movements.
Intimidation	Using anger, posture, threats, property damage, reckless behavior, or implied consequences to create fear and compliance.	They punch walls, drive dangerously during conflict, loom over someone, or say, 'You will regret this.'
Threats and Ultimatums	Using threatened loss, punishment, exposure, abandonment, or retaliation to force a decision.	'Agree to this or I will stop paying, take the children, or tell everyone your private information.'
Guilt-Tripping	Using guilt, obligation, or exaggerated suffering to pressure someone into compliance.	'After everything I have done for you, this is how you repay me?'
Shaming	Attacking a person's worth or identity to gain control.	'No one else would put up with you.'
Playing the Victim	Presenting oneself as powerless or harmed to avoid responsibility or recruit rescuers, even when one holds more power in the situation.	They focus entirely on how painful it was to be confronted and ignore the behavior that prompted the confrontation.
Martyrdom	Performing sacrifice or suffering in a way that creates debt, guilt, or moral superiority.	They insist on doing more than requested, then use it later as proof that others owe them.
Rescue-Then-Control	Offering help that later becomes leverage, obligation, or a basis for control.	They provide money or assistance, then claim this gives them authority over personal decisions.
Conditional Affection	Providing love, praise, closeness, or approval only when the other person complies or performs.	Affection appears when the person agrees and disappears when they assert independence.
Negging	Using backhanded compliments or subtle insults to lower confidence and increase approval-seeking.	'You look good for your age,' or 'You are actually pretty when you try.'
Comparison	Using other people as a standard to provoke insecurity, competition, or compliance.	'My ex never complained about this,' or 'Why can't you be more like your sister?'
Public-Private Split	Presenting as charming, generous, or calm in public while behaving very differently in private.	Others see patience and kindness, while the family experiences contempt, threats, or rage at home.
Image Management	Prioritizing how one appears over repairing harm or changing behavior.	They make public gestures of generosity but resist private accountability or meaningful change.
Reactive Abuse / Provoked Reaction	A non-diagnostic term describing a pattern in which someone repeatedly provokes, corners, or destabilizes another person and then points to that person's eventual reaction as proof that they are the problem.	After hours of taunting and denial, the targeted person raises their voice; the manipulator records only the raised voice and shows it to others.
Baiting	Deliberately provoking an emotional reaction that can later be criticized, used as evidence, or turned into conflict.	They make a cruel accusation immediately before a public event, then portray the other person's distress as irrational.
Dog Whistling	Using coded words, gestures, or references that have a harmful meaning known to the target but appear harmless to outsiders.	They mention a private insecurity in a joking tone at a family gathering, knowing only the

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		target understands the threat or humiliation.
Gaslighting by Proxy	Recruiting others, intentionally or unintentionally, to reinforce a distorted narrative and pressure someone to doubt themselves.	Friends repeat, 'He says he is only worried about you,' without knowing the pattern of intimidation behind the scenes.
Flying Monkeys	An informal term for people recruited to pressure, monitor, criticize, or carry messages to the target on behalf of the manipulator.	A relative calls to insist the target apologize after hearing only the manipulator's version.
Parentification	Placing a child in an adult emotional, caregiving, mediating, or decision-making role.	A parent confides adult relationship details to a child and expects the child to take sides or provide emotional support.
Child Triangulation	Using a child to carry messages, gather information, take sides, or influence the other parent.	'Tell your mother she needs to pay for this,' or questioning a child about the other parent's private life.
Undermining	Quietly weakening another person's authority, confidence, relationships, or plans.	A parent agrees to a rule privately, then tells the children the other parent is unreasonable for enforcing it.
Sabotage	Deliberately interfering with another person's work, plans, relationships, health, or progress.	They create a crisis before an important appointment, hide needed items, or disrupt sleep before a major event.
Withholding Information	Keeping back information the other person reasonably needs in order to maintain control or create failure.	They do not share schedule changes, financial details, or decisions that directly affect the other person.
Information Flooding	Overwhelming someone with excessive messages, documents, arguments, or demands so they cannot respond thoughtfully.	They send dozens of rapid messages containing multiple accusations and deadlines during a workday.
Manufactured Urgency	Creating artificial time pressure to prevent consultation, reflection, or informed consent.	'You must sign today or the entire deal disappears,' despite no verified deadline.
Confusion as Control	Keeping expectations, plans, or explanations inconsistent so the other person remains off balance and dependent.	Rules change without notice, and asking for clarity is treated as argumentative.
Crazy-Making	An informal term for patterns of contradiction, denial, provocation, and instability that leave another person confused and emotionally dysregulated.	They demand closeness, punish closeness, accuse the person of withdrawing, and deny sending mixed messages.
Narcissistic Supply	An informal, non-clinical term for attention, admiration, emotional reactions, status, or control that reinforces a person's self-image. It should not be used as a diagnosis.	They provoke conflict because any intense reaction feels preferable to being ignored.
Discard	An informal term for abruptly devaluing, abandoning, or replacing someone once they are no longer useful, compliant, or validating.	After years of dependence, they suddenly act as though the relationship meant nothing and quickly idealize someone new.

Common Patterns Behind the Terms

Reality control: Denial, rewriting history, selective memory, feigned confusion, and gaslighting weaken confidence in what you know.

Accountability avoidance: DARVO, blame shifting, projection, minimization, deflection, and whataboutism move attention away from the person's choices.

Emotional conditioning: Love bombing, intermittent reinforcement, breadcrumbing, conditional affection, and withdrawal train someone to chase approval and fear disconnection.

Power and compliance: Coercive control, threats, financial abuse, isolation, monitoring, manufactured urgency, and boundary punishment reduce freedom of choice.

Reputation and alliances: Triangulation, smear campaigns, flying monkeys, and gaslighting by proxy control the social narrative and may isolate the target.

Questions That Help Identify a Pattern

- ☐ Do I routinely leave conversations more confused than when they began?
- ☐ Am I expected to explain my feelings while the other person is excused from explaining their behavior?
- ☐ Do rules, agreements, or standards change depending on what benefits them?
- ☐ Does saying no lead to punishment, withdrawal, threats, financial consequences, or social retaliation?
- ☐ Am I becoming isolated, hypervigilant, less confident, or afraid to raise ordinary concerns?
- ☐ Do apologies lead to sustained change, or only to a brief reset before the pattern repeats?
- ☐ Is the public version of this person dramatically different from the private one?

What Healthy Repair Usually Includes

- ✓ A specific acknowledgment of what happened
- ✓ Concern for the impact, not only the person's intent
- ✓ No retaliation for raising the issue
- ✓ A sincere apology without blame shifting
- ✓ A concrete plan to prevent repetition
- ✓ Consistent behavioral change over time
- ✓ Respect for boundaries and independent choices

Documentation Tip

Use neutral, observable language: "On August 1, he said X. On August 3, he denied saying X. The text message from August 1 contains the statement." This is often more useful than writing only, "He gaslighted me."

Educational resource • Not a diagnostic checklist