



AuSM's highly trained, certified therapists have committed their careers to helping individuals with autism understand their diagnosis and address both the challenges and gifts that it can bring. The AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team sends out a monthly e-mail to answer questions submitted by the autism community. This is one of the past issues of the column. Visit www.ausm.org to sign up to receive the e-mails.

Dear Therapist:

I'm an autistic person and I have problems with light and smells. I struggle most with bright headlights some cars have and that sometimes makes it stressful to drive, and I often can smell things other people can't. Some family members tell me to just look away from the lights and that they can't smell anything so I'm making it up. They'll say things like "It's not that bad, you'll get used to it." After I hear this, I feel so defeated and sometimes wonder if I am just making things up or if my brain is just telling me I smell something. Then I saw online that this type of thing can be gaslighting – even if it's unintentional. Can you tell us more about gaslighting and what to do about it – especially the unintentional kind?

– **Too Sensitive in the Twin Cities**

Dear Sensitive:

As a therapist I definitely put those comments in the category of gaslighting and, you're right, it isn't necessarily the same thing as the abuse tactic of intentional gaslighting...BUT it still has a significant emotional impact and needs to be addressed as your needs are valid.

For an overview of gaslighting, here is a thorough article: <https://disorient.co/gaslighting/>. The author, Helena, makes several excellent points in their blog post. Two of my favorites are:

"Gaslighting is also not simply confined to lying. It's a specific ongoing practice of deception that sows the target's self-doubt."

This is an important concept when it comes to gaslighting. It's not quite as simple as someone challenging your opinion or even you stating your needs. Gaslighting extends further into your concept of self and can harm self-esteem.



For example, someone disagreeing with your opinion once can be distressing, especially if they're mean about it, but it's not necessarily gaslighting if they say they've had a different experience. Now, if they say they've never experienced that and therefore your experience is wrong and you're misrepresenting it, that's where we get into gaslighting territory.

"...disabled people are especially vulnerable to gaslighting. Whether their disability is physical or mental, disabled people are often seen as ill or 'broken', and therefore, their perceptions and accounts are less likely to be believed."

This quote touches on the most common form of gaslighting I hear about from clients. It seems to be especially prevalent when it comes to sensory experiences. For example, you say something in the room smells strong and you need to leave that room. There's a couple of forms of gaslighting that can happen here. The most frequent one is a glib "It's not that bad" or "I don't smell anything" – these kinds of responses are dismissive of the sensory assault an autistic person may be experiencing even though they are true statements for that individual.

Another way that gaslighting can happen in this example is when people tell you that you must learn to deal with it and it's not that bad. Again, we have to face the double empathy problem here to see that someone without sensory sensitivities cannot empathize with what it's like to be under sensory assault. They have no idea that it's shutting down your nervous system and has fast-tracked a meltdown or shutdown.

So what to do when you're on the receiving end of gaslighting? If it is the abusive type, meaning the goal is to tear your sense of self apart, please work with a therapist and/or reach out to an abuse hotline. All of the literature I've read suggests NOT confronting this sort of gaslighting directly as it could significantly backfire.

With the unintentional gaslighting, a lot depends on context and the level of rapport in the relationship. I'd say if it were a close friend, you should have the leeway to say something like, "When you dismiss my experience, it hurts me because it seems like you don't believe me or don't care. Could you acknowledge that autism makes me more sensitive to smells?"



This is the nonviolent communication model. But sometimes we don't have enough rapport with someone to be this vulnerable. Sometimes they may not even know you are autistic! I do still think the nonviolent communication model is helpful in these situations, too, but I'd preface it with some soft disclosure: "I've always had a stronger sense of smell than everyone I know. I definitely smell something."

Then, go into the nonviolent communication model: "When you state that you don't think the smell is strong, I feel dismissed and unvalued. I need to avoid a meltdown here at work so we can get this project done. I need to work in another room away from this smell. Can we find another space together?"

Statements like this also invite the other person to collaborate and avoid any blaming as that just puts people in defense mode. The nonviolent communication model takes practice and sometimes even some pre-prepared scripted statements for those repeat offenders, but hopefully you'll be able to feel more acknowledged and empowered.

– **Beth Pitchford, MA, LPCC**
Therapist, Autism Society of Minnesota

If you would like to submit a question for the AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team, please e-mail autismcounseling@ausm.org or contact us at 651.647.1083.