

Dr. Robin Stern: The psychological abuse of somebody taking away your reality and your allowing that to happen was far worse than beating someone up, than having black and blue marks.

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Lily Cornell Silver: Hi. I'm Lily Cornell Silver and welcome back to Mind Wide Open, my mental health focus interview series. Today I am talking to Dr. Robin Stern, who is the Associate Director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, and a Professor at the Child Study Center at Yale University. She is also a colleague of Dr. **Marc Brackett** from my second interview. She is also the Author of the book, *The Gaslight Effect*, and today we're going to be talking about what gaslighting is, how to deal with it, and how it impacts your mental health. Thank you so much for watching.

Thank you so much for being here, Robin. I'm so excited to talk to **you**.

Dr. Robin Stern: Good to be here.

Lily Cornell Silver: *The Gaslight Effect* is something that has been very relevant in my life and something that almost everyone I know has experienced, so I'm super excited to talk about it and to hear your expertise. So you are the Author of the book *The Gaslight Effect*, which I have right here.

Dr. Robin Stern: Yeah. Yeah. Thank you.

Lily Cornell Silver: A little book club. As I said, gaslighting is something that I think everyone experiences to a varying degree, you know, at some point, but most people, including me up until recently, don't necessarily know exactly what it looks like, or what the signs are, so let's just start off. How do you define gaslighting?

Dr. Robin Stern: So, gaslighting is a form of manipulation, a form of psychological abuse where the gaslighter is seeking to sow seeds of doubt in your mind –

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: Of the target of the gaslightee, right?

Lily Cornell Silver: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Robin Stern: So causing someone with intent to cause someone to second guess their reality, their character, their perceptions.

Lily Cornell Silver: And when you phrase it that way I mean it sounds very familiar, but it also sounds like very intense, you know? So are there – do people always know when they're doing it or can you kind of gaslight subconsciously?

Dr. Robin Stern: People don't always know. Gaslighters are not born gaslighters.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: It's a socially learned skill set, if you will. It's a socially learned way of controlling the moment, of people writing themselves when they feel uncomfortable and of controlling the other person, getting that other person to basically stay attached to them, stay in the conversation, at the same time, second guessing their reality, and their sanity, and their perception.

Lily Cornell Silver: Totally. Where does that term originate, the term gaslight?

Dr. Robin Stern: So, in 1944 there was this wonderful movie called *Gaslight*. A diabolical guy is gaslighting his innocent and loving wife. He has to convince her that she's crazy, so she gets taken away to a mental institution and he can forage around in the attic and find –

Lily Cornell Silver: Wow.

Dr. Robin Stern: **The jewels** that he's looking for.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: The way he does that is by telling her that she is, for example, forgetful. She says, "Don't be silly. Of course I'm not forgetful."

Then he steals something from her and he says, "Paula, where is that broach that I gave you?"

And she looks for it, knowing where she put it, but of course it's not there anymore, because he stole it. And then she begins to buy

into the way he sees her and then she begins to say, “You’re right, Gregory. I’m very forgetful. Maybe I’m just too tired.” Then she goes into what I call Stage Two of gaslighting where she’s defending herself over and over again, “But I didn’t mean to. I’m really not like that. I’m just tired right now.”

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: And then she’s there on their way to a spiraling into her depression, which is what the movie – the last chapter of the movie when she’s depressed and then ultimately finds out she’s been gaslighted.

But what was really interesting to me is as I was watching that movie and I saw her devolve over time, I recognized that that same thing had happened to many of my patients over **and over again**.

Lily Cornell Silver: Wow.

Dr. Robin Stern: And many of the strong women I knew, who were otherwise very confident and if somebody met them on the street they would think, “Boy, that person has it all together.” And yet, in this dynamic where one person has power, a very important definition – a part of the definition of gaslighting that I believe I left out when I said it, is that one person is more powerful and in that powerful role convinces you because you idealize, and because you need them, because you’ve given them the power. If you watch the movie over and over, as I have, you realize that somewhere in her childhood there was some vulnerability about – that she developed a vulnerability to boundaries being fluid between what’s real and what’s not real, because as she’s moving away from her home somebody is saying to her, “Just forget everything you saw. It’s no matter. You just look forward,” right?

Lily Cornell Silver: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Robin Stern: And so it’s very easy, for example, when somebody tells you, “You’re just too sensitive,” or, “You’re flirting,” or, “What’s the matter with you? You don’t know anything about finances,” that you could, even if it hurts in the moment, and even if you’re second guessing in the moment, you move past it and you forget it.

Lily Cornell Silver: And just to circle back to your own experience, I'd love to hear more about how you got started on the path of researching gaslighting, or if there were any events that triggered, you know, your wanting to know more about it.

Dr. Robin Stern: I've been talking to a colleague and friend, Naomi Wolf, and I was saying I had seen the movie *Gaslight* and that that seemed to me exactly what was happening to many of our friends and many of my patients. We were at a park at that moment and a little boy was running through the park. He was chasing a ball that he and his father had been tossing around and the ball, if I remember correctly, the ball like moved out of the park through a hole in the fence, and the little boy went to chase it. The father started screaming at him, like, "What's the matter with you? I told you. You're so clumsy," but you could see that little boy in that moment taking on all of that negativity and first trying to say, "No, but I was just playing," well, "No, you were just being..." whatever it was.

I remember in that moment saying, "No, he just redefined his reality for him."

Lily Cornell Silver: Right. Wow.

Dr. Robin Stern: And that is exactly what's happening. Naomi and I turned to each other in that moment and she said to me, "You have to write that book."

Lily Cornell Silver: Right. Something you write about in the book too is the person who's being gaslit becoming reliant upon the opinion of the person gaslighting them, or their self-image become reliant upon what the other person thinks of them.

Dr. Robin Stern: Yes and a really important point: They can't stand it, right?

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: Like when you're in a gaslighting relationship – I remember in my first marriage my then husband would tell me that when we had a disagreement that there was something wrong with the way I was thinking about things. I was an expert on gaslighting, so of course I knew. To give you an example, he was always late and so I

would think, “You know, I don’t have a problem with being late. He’s just being disrespectful and isn’t aware of it.”

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: But over time he would – he convinced me that there really could be something wrong with what I was taught when I was a child about being on time. I couldn’t stand it that he thought that of me.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right. Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: It was a really hard piece to come to grips with. I’m just going to have to accept that he will never think I’m right, that he will never see it from my side, that he will always think that there is something wrong with me.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: And that piece is really – is really tough to hold onto.

Lily Cornell Silver: I mean as you’re saying that I’m coming up with multiple examples in my own life of how difficult it’s been to let go of someone else’s perception of me, especially in that gaslighting relationship where I’ve been gaslit in multiple different relationships in my life, you know, and even now it’s very difficult to let go of caring what others think of you or how they perceive you, but it’s, you know, a lifelong thing to let go of that and realize you don’t have control over that.

Dr. Robin Stern: Yeah. You don’t have control over it and actually, you don’t need it either.

Lily Cornell Silver: I think especially within the adult-child relationship as a child you don’t have the vocabulary or necessarily the information to know that you’re being gaslit, you know? It’s an adult that’s supposed to be looking out for you and caring for you.

Dr. Robin Stern: Of course.

Lily Cornell Silver: So in that vein, is this something that happens only between intimate partners or can it show up in a variety of different relationships?

Dr. Robin Stern: Well, you said it. It can show up in a variety of relationships.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: And you don't recognize it when it's coming from someone who is supposed to be taking care of you and in charge of your growing up and loving you –

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: And having your best interest at heart. Sometimes your parents or the person who's parenting you, or the adult in your life does have your best interest at heart, sometimes, but they have learned to gaslight as a way of control. So you might hear a parent saying to a child, "Come on. You're not hungry. You're tired. Listen, don't trust. You don't know what you're feeling."

Lily Cornell Silver: Totally.

Dr. Robin Stern: "You really don't know what you're feeling."

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: Or, "Come on, you're so sensitive about that."

"But, Mom, you know, you hurt my feelings. I think that was like a really mean thing you said."

"Oh, come one. You've got to be kidding me. That was mean?"

Lily Cornell Silver: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Robin Stern: "That was mean? Don't you think you're a little too sensitive? Maybe you're PMSing, you know? Maybe you're PMSing."

And now you can use the pandemic as an excuse to gaslight somebody. This is – come on –

Lily Cornell Silver: Totally. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: This is the **pandemic** talking, like this is –

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: “There is something really wrong with you. You’ve been confined too long.”

Lily Cornell Silver: Wow. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: “There isn’t anything wrong with me. I’m not doing anything. I’m just sitting here on my computer. Why are you so suspicious? It’s the pandemic getting to you.”

Lily Cornell Silver: Right. That’s so interesting. So I wanted to tie that in with what the effects of gaslighting can be on mental health, like with someone who’s maybe predisposed to anxiety, or depression, or bipolar, how can gaslighting affect your mental health in that way?

Dr. Robin Stern: When I was researching the book in 2007 I spoke to a lot of people, who were working with women who were in crisis, women in battered shelters, battered women in shelters, and they all said the same thing; that the psychological abuse of somebody taking away your reality and your allowing that to happen was far worse than beating someone up, than having black and blue marks.

Lily Cornell Silver: Wow.

Dr. Robin Stern: Because if you have black and blue marks you know that you can point your finger and say, “That guy did that to me.”

Lily Cornell Silver: Mm-hmm. Right. Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: Like, when your self-esteem is torn and you’re not that same person who walked into that relationship you don’t know whose fault it is and so you end up blaming yourself and feeling – you’re then in stage three gaslighting, just really feeling like there’s something radically wrong with you.

Lily Cornell Silver: Wow. Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: So to your point, or to your question about mental health, it can definitely land you in depression and the emotional labor of being anxious all of the time as you’re going through the stages of gaslighting, of having to put on a happy face, or a loving face, or be accommodating when you’re really terrified that you’re about to be told that there’s something wrong with you, you don’t know

how to think straight, or that you're forgetful, or that you're paranoid, you're dealing with that on your inside, while on your outside you're trying to accommodate the person who's about to do that to you.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: One insight that I've been talking a lot about over the last couple of days came from an article I read about an interview with a colleague, Heidi Brooks of Yale School of Management. She talked about the idea of double consciousness and double consciousness, she was talking about it in relation to Black Americans feeling like they have to be in the head of their White counterparts all of the time to match their perceptions. I thought, "My God, what an incredible term, because that is the way people in gaslighting relationships live." So you've been in those relationships. You know how hard we have to work –

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: To be in the shoes of the person doing the gaslighting. So you manage what you're doing because you have to look a certain way in their perception.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right. And try to predict what the next move is going to be so that you can counteract it or somehow avoid it.

Dr. Robin Stern: Exactly. Exactly. Right. Exactly. So that you can control the damage before it starts.

Lily Cornell Silver: Exactly. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: So it's a very preventionist model that you're actually –

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: Think of how exhausting it is, right? So when you are anxious and exhausted over time it completely leaves you depleted, completely –

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: Leaves you depressed and –

Lily Cornell Silver: And wondering where you went wrong to allow that situation to happen. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: Right. And feeling like you are that person who's completely screwed up, or completely paranoid, or not deserving of a good relationship.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right. That sounds so familiar.

Dr. Robin Stern: Yes. I'm sorry.

Lily Cornell Silver: Unfortunately it sounds very familiar.

Dr. Robin Stern: Oh my goodness.

Lily Cornell Silver: But no, it's really powerful to hear you give name to that, an explanation to that, because in my experiences with gaslighting it does often times come down to me feeling like, "Oh, I shouldn't have felt that way." So I've experienced a lot of that, you know, being told that what I'm feeling is wrong, or that I'm being too sensitive. As I said earlier, it was very difficult to name, because I was a child and growing up in it, you know, you think this is just how things are, this is how I'm supposed to be talked to. I went through much of my childhood feeling that way and realizing the effects of gaslighting.

Dr. Robin Stern: Yeah. And when we are empathic what are we trained to do? We're trained to stand in the shoes of somebody else –

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: And so when you stand in the shoes of somebody else you take the risk that both of you are in that pair of shoes and nobody is standing in yours.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right. Right. Right. Nobody is in your corner. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: Right. Exactly.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: And so it's easy to take on the other person's perception and when it happens over and over again you forget that essential part of empathy. You have to come back to your own.

Lily Cornell Silver: And also, you know, reading your work and reading *The Gaslight Effect*, and providing vocabulary to myself and understanding to myself of what the situation is is such a game changer in that regard, especially when it comes to gaslighting. You can't – you know, you need to be able to understand it, to name it, and once you do there's so much power in that, because you can see, "Oh, this is what's happening. I'm not crazy. You know, they don't have this power over me and I don't need to rely on how they perceive me."

Dr. Robin Stern: You knew there was something wrong. You just didn't know what to call it, right?

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: And so people who read my book over the years have said pretty much that to me, like, "I knew. I just knew I wasn't crazy."

Lily Cornell Silver: A lot of the time there are things that you can't escape, you know? You can't just escape the society that we're living in, or you maybe can't escape like a parent-child relationship or something like that. Do you have any tools to use for when you are being gaslit but can't necessarily escape that situation?

Dr. Robin Stern: One of the things that I thought a lot about during the Me Too Movement was that people felt called to speak out, in my opinion, to reclaim their reality.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah. Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: That really was a moment where powerful men said, "It doesn't matter. It's unimportant. Don't tell anyone," or, "Tell people, but it's like no big deal. What are you making such a big deal about?" Then all of the sudden people began to say, "This was a big deal. This was wrong and you can speak."

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: So I think that there was truth telling that was so important, but also that knowing that you were speaking the truth and that you knew that you were violated, or degraded, or taken advantage of all along and having that validated was so important.

Lily Cornell Silver: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Robin Stern: So I would say the first tool is like self-awareness, really spending some time pausing, turning off the noise of the outside world and spending some time with yourself and thinking about, you know, am I okay. So when it's a parent, a relative who's constantly gaslighting you you can set a limit. Maybe it's painful to say, "I'm sorry. You know, I'll see you on Thanksgiving," when it's July, you know?

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: But maybe you have to do that.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: There are going to be people in your life with whom you say things like that and then they continue to gaslight you, so if that's the case you may just have to say you have to breathe and use the cognitive strategies of emotional intelligence and self-talk, positive self-talk. I can get through this. It's going to be okay. I know what the truth is. Or reframing – okay, he's just manipulating me here, but I'm going to be okay, or this is a lesson for me to learn. This is my teacher. This moment is my teacher.

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: You know, what am I learning here?

Lily Cornell Silver: I mean I think having like a therapist or that third-party person, like my mom has been someone who's been really vital for me in that regard as somebody who can fortify you, you know, and say no matter what this person is telling you or trying to manipulate you into believing, or no matter how they're emotionally abusing you, you can trust yourself and you can trust your gut. I feel like a lot of the time it takes that third party to, you know, let you know you're not going insane.

Dr. Robin Stern: You know, when you asked the question earlier about mental health, when you're in a gaslighting relationship and you're at the point where you are so bought into that dynamic –

Lily Cornell Silver: Right.

Dr. Robin Stern: And you're dancing what I call in my book the Gaslight Tango, and then the person leaves you it can really catapult you into a depression, because –

Lily Cornell Silver: Absolutely.

Dr. Robin Stern: Not only are you screwing up when you're actually interacting, but you're also not even good enough for the person to stay around for.

Lily Cornell Silver: Do you have like any, just like a specific list of like tangible things, like what to look for if somebody is gaslighting you?

Dr. Robin Stern: We've actually been talking about them throughout the program, okay?

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: So I'm asking you if you are avoiding me and you're telling me I'm paranoid.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: Maybe I'm paranoid, but that doesn't mean you weren't avoiding me.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: So you gain perspective, you know?

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah. Totally.

Dr. Robin Stern: And so watching that behavior and somebody who is an intimidator kind of gaslighter will definitely be angrier, will be putting you down, might be cursing, might be yelling, trying to scare you, trying to threaten you –

Lily Cornell Silver: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Robin Stern: Somebody who is a good-guy gaslighter may just always have a pleasant tone, really – like raking you over the coals in the most pleasant way, right, a good-guy gaslighter.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah.

Dr. Robin Stern: And for the glamour gaslighter, that person who is often recognized in a cycle of abuse where you just feel shattered because he just told you that there was something wrong with you and he knows it, you know it, and then the next day he comes home with flowers.

Lily Cornell Silver: For me that's been gaslit from, you know, a very young age, that's been gaslit as a child into young adulthood, I definitely – my coping strategies became, you know, just like don't cause any trouble, keep my feelings pressed down so that it won't, you know, initiate any sort of attack or leave me vulnerable to pain. So having those kinds of difficult conversations is something that as I've grown up I've learned a lot about and tried to strengthen that muscle, you know, of not just laying down and taking it if somebody is gaslighting me or emotionally abusing me to be able to have those uncomfortable conversations and to create boundaries and cut people off, you know, if people need to be cut off.

Dr. Robin Stern: One of the things that I said in my book that I really still like a lot among other things is, “No is a whole sentence.”

Lily Cornell Silver: Mm-hmm. Yeah. That is very powerful. That is very powerful. That is, yeah, so true, so true.

I would love to end on the note of what is something that's bringing you hope right now, Robin?

Dr. Robin Stern: That we're having this conversation.

Lily Cornell Silver: Beautiful.

Dr. Robin Stern: That we're having this conversation and that there are young people, like yourself, maybe you're leading the charge of young women in particular, who are standing up for your reality and

giving yourself the permission to feel and with the courage to say your truth and want everyone to have lives that are gaslight free.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah. Absolutely. Well, thank you so much. That means a lot to me. I admire you and your work so much and you've definitely been a beacon of light for me and helped me through so many of these situations, so thank you so much for being here, Robin, it really means the world to me.

Dr. Robin Stern: Thank you for doing this. Really appreciate it and for having me. I look forward to more.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yes. Yes. Thank you so much.

Dr. Robin Stern: Thank you, Lily.

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