

# BRUNCH & BRAINSTORM Labor and Love Trafficking

Event Handout

Quick definitions and practical provider guidance on gaslighting and trauma bonding.

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## WHY This Matters

Love is real in all its forms.

Even when there is manipulation, control, or harm, the love a survivor feels can still be real.

“Love” can be used as a tool to recruit, control, and keep someone from leaving.

## Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a pattern of manipulation that makes someone doubt their own memory, judgment, or reality. The goal is control.

In trafficking contexts, gaslighting can be used to increase dependency and strengthen trauma bonds.

### What it can sound like

- “That never happened.”
- “You’re too sensitive. You’re making things up.”
- “Everyone agrees you’re the problem.”
- “After all I’ve done for you, you owe me.”

### What it does

- Creates confusion and self-doubt
- Increases shame and dependence on the abuser’s version of reality
- Reduces help-seeking and increases isolation

## How “LOVE” Gets Used for Control

- **Recruitment through romance or belonging :** “You’re safe with me.” “We’re a team.”
- **Rewriting the deal:** “This is temporary.” “You’ll pay me back.”
- **Debt and obligation:** “I supported you. You owe me.”

## Trauma Bonding

Trauma bonding is an attachment that traffickers intentionally create to build connection, dependency, and control.

It often develops through a cycle of harm → apology → affection → hope → harm again.

Gaslighting and other manipulation tactics can strengthen this bond over time.

### What it can look like

- Defending the trafficker even after serious harm
- Feeling loyal, responsible, or “needed”
- Minimizing what happened because “they’re good sometimes”
- Knowing it’s unsafe, but feeling unable to leave

### What keeps the bond strong

- Intermittent kindness (“They’re not always like this.”)
- Threats or fear of consequences
- Financial dependence
- Isolation from family, friends, or services

- **Isolation and discrediting help:** “They’ll judge you.” “They’re lying to you.”
- **Punishment plus repair:** harm followed by gifts, affection, or promises

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### WHY This Matters for Providers

These dynamics can look like “noncompliance,” “ambivalence,” or “going back.” Often, it’s a bond + survival strategy, not a lack of insight.

If we miss the dynamic, we may unintentionally:

- Push too hard, too fast
- Increase risk
- Reinforce shame
- Replicate the control dynamic (pressure, loss of choice)

## Practice Guidance

- Validate reality without debating details. “That sounds confusing and exhausting.”
- Offer choices and small next steps. Control is the goal; choice is the antidote.
- Name patterns gently. “Sometimes harm + affection can create a strong bond.”
- Expect mixed feelings. Love, fear, loyalty, grief can all show up at once.
- Focus on safety planning, not persuasion.
- Stay consistent. Trust builds over time, especially after repeated manipulation.
- Avoid shame, urgency, and debate.
- Name what’s real: The love they feel may be real and valid, even when exploitation is happening.
- Anchor to safety: Healthy love includes mutual care, choice, safety, boundaries, and freedom

## What to AVOID (and why)

**Avoid statements that create shame, urgency, or debate:**

- “Why don’t you just leave?”
- “If it was that bad, you would have left.”
- “You’re defending them.”
- “You have to report this right now.” (unless you truly do, then explain requirements clearly)

### Common pitfalls

- Over-correcting the person’s reality (“That’s not true, here’s what happened.”)
- Pushing for disclosure before safety is in place
- Treating return contact as failure instead of part of the process

### Helpful prompts

- “What feels safest right now?”
- “What do you want to see happen next?”
- “Who feels safe to involve?”

## Resources

- **Framework TA:** <https://frameworkta.org>
- **U.S. Department of State TIP Fact Sheet: Trauma Bonding (508):** [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TIP\\_Factsheet-Trauma-Bonding-in-Human-Trafficking-508.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TIP_Factsheet-Trauma-Bonding-in-Human-Trafficking-508.pdf)
- **The Hotline: What Is Gaslighting?:** <https://www.thehotline.org/resources/what-is-gaslighting/>
- **GBV Learning Network:** Gaslighting backgrounder: [https://www.gbvlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/backgrounders/gaslighting\\_in\\_intimate\\_relationships/index.html](https://www.gbvlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/backgrounders/gaslighting_in_intimate_relationships/index.html)
- **“The Ties That Bind Us” summary sheet:** <https://frameworkta.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Ties-That-Bind-Us-summary-sheet.pdf>