## Hey! What's New? 2026-43

## Five Phrases Manipulators Use and How Shut Them Down on the Spot

I recently found advice that's a little different from my normal news bits. An article by Shadé Zahrai on the CNBC webpage notes that "We've all been there: Someone makes a comment that might sound harmless on the surface, but it leaves you feeling unsettled. Manipulation can be sneaky."

Zahrai points out that "manipulators want you to question your interpretation of events so they can control the narrative. If you're struggling to figure out what just happened, you can't hold them accountable. They'll use that opening to dodge consequences and get their preferred outcome." She adds that she's identified some of the most common phrases that manipulators use. "Here's how to take your power back and defuse them on the spot."

**1. I was only joking.** This, she says, is often used after a comment has already crossed a line. "When you understandably react to what was said, the manipulator will reframe their tone as humorous. This is meant to make you feel as though *your* response is the problem. "The best way to respond, she advises, is with 'whatever your intent was, it didn't land that way for me.' This keeps the focus on the impact of the comment, rather than their intention. When you keep the conversation focused on how something was received, it becomes harder to dismiss your experience."

**2. If you really cared, you would….**This phrase, Zahrai points out, suggests that loyalty has to look a certain way. "Manipulators use it to make you feel like a bad person for saying no. By triggering guilt or a sense of obligation, they increase the chances you'll comply and, in the process, call your character and sense of self into question."

A good response is to say "I do care, and this is the decision I'm making." This, she says, "separates your values and identity from the unfair demands being placed on you. It allows you to define what care looks like on your own terms."

**3. Stop being so sensitive.** According to Zahrai, "manipulators use this to invalidate your emotions and shift attention away from their behavior. By framing your reaction as 'too much,' they make you the problem so they don't have to take accountability for what they said or did."

How to respond: "I'm being clear about what doesn't work for me." Zahrai says that "research shows that when feelings are dismissed, people are more likely to second-guess themselves and become less likely to assert boundaries. Articulating your experience clearly can help stop that pattern."

**4. I guess I'm the bad guy then.** This, she says, "reframes the situation so they become the victim. They want you to reassure them, instead of addressing their own behavior." She advises responding by saying "I'm focusing on what happened, not labelling you." This stops the conversation from turning into a debate about who's right or wrong as a person.

**5. You're overreacting! This isn't a big deal.** Zahrai says this phrase minimizes the problem before you've had a chance to work through it. "They want to nudge you to move on, even if things still feel unresolved. If you are thrown off balance, it is easier to dismiss your concerns altogether."

The best response: “This is important to me, so I’d like to talk about it.” What counts as a “big deal” is shaped by the impact it has, she says, “not how quickly someone wants to move on. This response puts you back in the driver’s seat by defining what warrants a discussion.”

All of these examples have a consistent pattern, Zahrai says. “The language isn’t overtly aggressive, but it introduces just enough doubt or pressure to shift the balance of the interaction in favor of the manipulator. The goal is to buy yourself time to think clearly and respond in a way that brings the conversation back to reality. If you find yourself in any of these situations, stay steady, don’t over-explain and hold your position.”

Check out Psychology expert: 5 'sneaky' phrases manipulators use—how shut them down on the spot.