



Trauma-informed support for women rebuilding after abuse

What Is Coercive Control?

Coercive control is a form of ongoing emotional and psychological abuse used to control, intimidate, isolate or create dependence within a relationship.

It is not always loud, visible or physical. In many cases, it builds gradually over time through patterns of behaviour that cause someone to feel fearful, confused, monitored, powerless or emotionally worn down.

Coercive control can happen in romantic relationships, family relationships or after separation. It often leaves people questioning themselves, walking on eggshells or feeling like they are “losing themselves” without fully understanding why.

Many survivors do not recognise coercive control at first because the behaviour may initially appear as care, protectiveness, concern or strong attachment.

1. Common Signs of Coercive Control

Emotional Manipulation

A person using coercive control may:

- Constantly criticise, blame or shame you
- Make you feel “too sensitive” or dramatic
- Twist situations to make you doubt your memory or reality
- Minimise your feelings or experiences
- Use guilt to control your decisions or behaviour
- Punish you emotionally through silence, withdrawal or mood changes#

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Example:

You try to explain that something upset you, but the conversation always ends with you apologising instead.

2. Isolation From Others

Coercive control often involves gradually limiting a person's independence or support network.

This may include:

- Complaining when you spend time with friends or family
- Creating arguments before or after social events
- Making you feel guilty for going out without them
- Monitoring calls, messages or social media
- Discouraging hobbies, work or outside interests

Example:

You stop reaching out to people because it feels easier than dealing with the stress, guilt or arguments that follow.

3. Monitoring & Control

This behaviour may appear as protectiveness or concern at first, but over time it can become controlling.

This may include:

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- Wanting constant updates about where you are
- Checking your phone or questioning who you speak to
- Becoming angry if you do not respond quickly enough
- Controlling finances, transport or access to resources
- Making decisions for you without discussion

Example:

You begin changing your behaviour to avoid conflict, even in small everyday situations, e.g., meeting up with friends and family

4. Fear, Intimidation & Walking on Eggshells

Coercive control often creates an environment where someone feels emotionally unsafe.

This may include:

- Unpredictable moods or reactions
- Threats, intimidation or emotional outbursts
- Smashing objects, aggressive driving or blocking exits
- Silent treatment used as punishment
- Making you feel responsible for keeping the peace

Example:

You constantly scan their mood or tone of voice to decide how to behave safely around them.

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5. Why It Can Be Hard to Recognise

Coercive control is often subtle and gradual.

Many survivors say they did not realise what was happening until they were emotionally exhausted, isolated or deeply anxious.

Some people minimise their experiences because:

- There are no physical injuries
- The coercive behaviour is inconsistent
- Positive moments create confusion and hope
- The behaviour is explained away as stress, love, jealousy or protectiveness
- They have been made to feel responsible for the problems in the relationship

Abuse does not need to be physical to have a serious emotional and psychological impact.

6. The Impact of Coercive Control

Living in a controlling or emotionally unsafe environment can affect every part of a person's wellbeing.

Survivors may experience:

- Anxiety and hypervigilance
- Low confidence or self-doubt
- Emotional exhaustion
- Isolation
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions

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- Feeling disconnected from themselves
- Depression or hopelessness
- Burnout and nervous system overwhelm
- Feeling trapped, dependent or fearful

Some survivors continue experiencing trauma responses long after the relationship has ended.

7. Post-Separation Abuse

Coercive control does not always stop after separation.

In some cases, abusive behaviour may continue through:

- Harassment or constant messaging
- Manipulation involving children
- Financial pressure or threats
- Monitoring or intimidation
- Attempts to regain control through guilt, fear or emotional pressure

Leaving an abusive relationship can sometimes increase risk temporarily, particularly when control is being challenged.

If Any of This Feels Familiar

You are not weak, dramatic or “crazy” for feeling affected by coercive control.

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Many survivors spend years trying to understand why they feel anxious, exhausted, emotionally unsafe or disconnected from themselves.

Understanding coercive control can be an important first step toward recognising unhealthy patterns, rebuilding confidence and accessing support.

Support & Further Resources

If you feel unsafe or need immediate help, contact emergency services or a domestic abuse support organisation in your area.

You deserve support that understands the full picture - including the emotional and psychological impact of abuse.

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