



A world without coercion

A PRIMER

Championing change through critical thinking and education

www.openmindsfoundation.org

A glossary of useful terms for understanding coercion

Authoritarianism: Enforcement or advocacy of strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom.

Black-and-White Thinking: One of the tools of coercion, admonishing victims to see the world in terms of extremes with no middle ground. It is right or wrong, good or evil. In the early development of a child we tend to use black-and-white thinking until their minds develop the ability to wisely handle choices. But in times of stress, people often revert to their child-like thinking, leaving them exposed to skilled manipulators. It also explains why mature adults, who are under lots of stress, will be more susceptible to the hooks presented by coercive groups.

Coercive Control: manipulating an individual to act against their best interests using violence, threats, intimidation or psychological techniques.

Cognitive Dissonance: The extremely uncomfortable feeling that occurs when a person's strong core beliefs are questioned by someone who presents evidence that contradicts those beliefs. Unable to accept the evidence, the person will then seek to rationalize, ignore or even deny the evidence as it does not fit their core belief.

Confirmation Bias: Tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information that confirms or strengthens one's prior personal beliefs or hypotheses. It is a type of cognitive bias.

Intelligent Disobedience: Doing right when what you're told to do is wrong.

Logical Fallacies: An error/ flaw in reasoning that renders an argument invalid; an argument in which a conclusion doesn't follow logically from what preceded it.

Lifton's eight criteria for thought reform: Robert Jay Lifton developed these criteria to identify the actions of coercive groups using manipulative techniques to gain total control over a person. His list can be used to measure the level of coercion in groups, relationships, families, and even in whole countries.

Personal autonomy: Refers to a person's sense of self-determination, being able to make choices regarding the direction of her/his own actions, including the freedom to pursue those choices, and it requires the absence of restraining forces that can limit this natural tendency.

Undue influence: Undue influence is the recognized legal term for influence by which a person is induced to act otherwise than by their own free will or without adequate attention to the consequences.

Three useful logical fallacies:

1. **Ad hominem:** An argument where a person is attacked and not the content of their point of view;
2. **Strawman:** Misrepresenting someone's argument and then attacking the distorted argument;
3. **Slippery slope:** A slippery slope argument is when someone asserts that a relatively small first step leads to a chain of related events culminating in some significant effect.



Coercive control: manipulating an individual to act against their best interests using violence, threats, intimidation or psychological techniques.

Changing society starts here...

Imagine a world without human trafficking, domestic abuse, fake news, effective political propaganda, religious extremism or cults. These are just some of the deep-rooted societal issues we can change if we evolve our education systems to encourage critical thinking, and use it to combat coercive control.

Critical thinking is a primary tool in combatting coercion because it encourages us to question why and how; to challenge our own beliefs; and to embrace change. Our mission is to champion critical thinking, by giving young people, their educators and their caregivers, practical tools and training in its techniques.

No one is born with a desire for physical or emotional abuse, to die unnecessarily because of faith-based beliefs, or to injure innocent people for their cause, yet these things happen to millions of people every day.

All are victims of coercion, which uses manipulation techniques to control and command victims, especially young people, to act against their own best interests. Sadly, we live in a world where coercion is rife, but we don't provide young people with the tools to recognize and resist it. The Open Minds Foundation is a charitable collective, guided by experts and those with personal experience, seeking to change these deep-rooted societal issues.

The human mind is predisposed to social influence and it tends to choose the path of least resistance, behaving spontaneously and not considering all the options.

This is particularly true of teenagers, whose brains are not fully developed until after twenty years of age.

How and why does coercion happen?

Unfortunately, the majority of victims of coercion are just like you and me, believing they will always make informed choices and could never be tricked into giving away their independence. They are usually unaware of the manipulation that is happening, and how or why their situations have changed.

Our ancestral environment required quick reactionary instincts, so we tend to respond automatically, and in doing so we form 'blind spots' where we omit information we feel is irrelevant. The brain then 'fills in' material to help make sense of what we are seeing: we focus on what we have seen before, what we expect to see, or what we want to see. It's why magic tricks and illusions work so well.

Once we have an established idea or expectation, we then hold on to it stubbornly because consistent patterns of behavior help make us feel comfortable.

This leaves us vulnerable to manipulators who can build on our assumptions and behaviors to convince us of new beliefs over time.

Coercion and coercive control don't usually happen all at once, but bit by bit as a manipulator slowly applies pressure.

How and why does coercion happen?

Psychological studies show how easily rational thinking can be bypassed and even individuals that we consider to be logical or particularly astute can become victims. At best, it creates individuals who are trapped in a situation beyond their control; at worst it creates extremists with an agenda to harm innocent people.

Sadly, the effects of coercion are widespread in today's world, underpinning everything from domestic violence to gang behaviors, from human trafficking to radicalization into terrorist groups.

The only way to combat coercion is through education, teaching people critical thinking skills and intelligent disobedience, which helps them to question what they see, know and believe to be true. This makes it harder for manipulators to influence people and makes people less susceptible to their practices.

The Open Minds Foundation was founded with the mission to educate young people and their parents and teachers about how to recognize and resist coercion in its many forms.



What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking is quite simply practising the ability to think clearly and rationally, to reduce susceptibility to misinformation. It means specifically and intentionally examining information to determine its validity and relevance.

The three key tenets of critical thinking are:

- **Curiosity:** being open to and actively seeking new information
- **Willingness:** to follow a line of enquiry, wherever it leads, no matter how uncomfortable
- **Critique:** applying logical, systematic reasoning to identify what the information tells us, without bias or agenda

Why does critical thinking help?

Our brain is predisposed to simplify and index information. As a result, it likes patterns, habits, and things that it has seen before. While useful in helping to prevent information overload, this approach leaves us vulnerable to manipulation and coercion, by reducing our ability to recognise false or partial information.

Practising critical thinking does the opposite. It teaches us to prioritise logic over emotion, to ensure we have access to information that is truly representative of the situation. As well as enabling us to make better decisions, critical thinking also equips us to better recognise manipulation in all its forms.

While anyone can and should improve their critical thinking skills, research shows that it is most effective when introduced to young people during their school years.





A model

Critical thinking takes practise and self-reflection, and a good awareness of self. Commonly, good critical thinkers will employ a range of critical thinking tools, but will also display some key characteristics and values including:

PAUSING

Instead of quick, efficient decision making, critical thinkers actively engage with the thought process and establishing why and how they are thinking in a particular way, in order to make a better decision.

ASKING

The more we ask, the more we can know, and potentially the more information we have to work with. Not only will good critical thinkers ask questions, but they tend to ask open questions that require more than a yes/no answer.

CONSIDERING

Bias and perspective don't invalidate the quality of information, but awareness of both helps critical thinkers to identify additional sources of information. Critical thinkers will consider the perspective from which the information is being offered and the potential bias that accompanies it.

IMPLICATION

Our own beliefs encourage us to act in a particular way, or approach problems from a particular perspective. There is no such thing as a perfect, pure decision, but understanding the implications of their beliefs helps critical thinkers to have an awareness on how that might bias their own judgement.

RESPECTING

Opinions differ and while there can be definite rights and wrongs, in the majority of cases, neither opinion is entirely right and there is plenty of nuance. Critical thinkers accept that they won't always agree with another individual, and approach conversations in a rational, open-minded and respectful way.

LOGIC

Did you know, humans have a "truth bias" which means that we believe what we are hearing is the truth, even if we have information to the contrary? Critical thinkers are typically aware of their own and others' limitations and actively seek out more information to make decisions based in reason, logic and evidence.

RE-EVALUATING

Critical thinkers are typically not afraid to admit they were wrong, or to change their stance in light of new information. Sticking doggedly to your beliefs, even in light of new evidence, is a common trait, and critical thinkers will actively challenge their own ideas.

What are the forms of coercion?

There are many terms describing the psychological control that an individual or group exerts over other people. These terms include mind control, thought reform and brainwashing, although some prefer to use the word coercion, coercive control, or the legal term 'undue influence'.

Coercion happens when a predatory individual or group takes control over a person's beliefs, interests, thoughts, feelings, legal or medical rights, possessions, finances or behavior without that person's full knowledge and explicit consent, usually under false pretenses. Influence is obtained with techniques including cajoling, false promises, intimidation, threats, shunning, humiliation, force, deprivation of basic needs, isolation, emotional blackmail, and / or psychological pressure.

There are many forms of coercion, which include: promoting faith-based medical neglect of children, human trafficking, bullying, cyber-bullying, gangs, abusive relationships, familial or parental alienation, radicalization, recruitment into racial supremacist and coercive political groups, internet based gurus, cults of all kinds, spiritual and religious abuse, gas lighting, recruitment into high-control pseudo religious groups, propaganda spinners, disseminators of fake news and con artists. Evidence of coercion is plentiful in these many forms.

How prevalent is coercion?

Conservative estimates suggest that at least 800 million or 10% of the global population are being coerced at any given time. The monetary cost is hundreds of billions of dollars, which includes: paying for healthcare for physical and mental injury and legal costs in the support of victims, law enforcement time investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of coercion, tax evasion and tax-breaks for manipulative groups and people under the guise of religious freedom, defense of one's national borders, and much more.

Ultimately, society absorbs the financial and emotional costs of coerced victims dealing with after-effects of mass shootings, terrorist attacks, and the unnecessary injury or loss of life. Despite these high costs, current activism is issue-specific, as groups campaign for prevention of specific applications, such as domestic violence or counter-terrorism. The concept of coercion and undue influence remains largely unpublicized and significantly misunderstood. This must change to ensure effective prevention of coercion, and trigger a domino effect to diminish its societal impacts.

Who is likely to become a victim?

We are all susceptible to coercion, and there is no specific “type” of person who is more likely to be drawn into a manipulative situation. Some victims are born into it, for example into a family with an abusive parent or relative, or a manipulative group, with high-control religious or political beliefs and biases. The majority of victims, however, will be affected by a manipulator who creates a new belief system, which changes the way the victim perceives the world and the ways in which people think and behave.

Why do people become victims in the first place?

1. An inborn psychological predisposition to seek acceptance within a community and to respect authority inclines ANY individual toward manipulation.
2. Educational systems do not effectively encourage questioning, research, debate and deciding for oneself.
3. People fail to fully examine what they are being told. Over time erodes one's own beliefs.
4. Critical thinking skills are not adequately taught.

Why are teenagers especially vulnerable?

Teenagers are undergoing significant brain development and this can hinder their judgment and make them vulnerable to predators and coercive groups that are skilled at targeting young people. Without proper psychological education, they can be easily seduced into gangs, hate groups, cults and abusive relationships.

When they're older, they may deeply regret and feel ashamed about decisions they were coerced into making that damaged their relationships, their mental and physical health, and their future prospects.



How can we eradicate harmful coercion?

There is no quick fix for coercion. It will take time, a multi-faceted approach and adequate funding to significantly reduce and combat the effects of coercion on society. Some activities will have a higher-profile effect, for example, legislative changes which control specific forms of coercion. Other activities will be deployed at a grass-roots level to support current and past victims and to inhibit further recruitment by manipulators and predators.

We know this can happen. An example is the enactment of Coercive Control Laws in England and Wales in 2015. Four years later Scotland and Ireland enacted similar laws.

Open Minds was established in 2015 to support legal recourse and to tackle coercion in all its many forms.

So what can be done about it?

It is particularly important to use educational opportunities with young people, as well as working with those who teach, care and protect them to:

- ensure curriculums and educational programs include information about coercion
- ensure that critical thinking is taught and encouraged so that people question what they are being told and cases of coercion reduce over time
- support charities and groups to enable recovery from any type of coercion or coercive control
- lobby for better protection of individuals and recognition of coercive control to reduce its prevalence.



The Open Minds Foundation website has information and resources to support these objectives and provide useful teaching tools if required.



www.openmindsfoundation.org

Where do we go from here?

At the Open Minds Foundation, we have recognized the connection between better critical thinking, and a reduction in coercive control. That's why we have invested in creating a suite of educational tools for teachers, that can support classroom learning and the development of critical thinking skills.

How can you help?

Our next priority is to make our resources available, and in use by as many school as possible. You can help us by:

- **supporting us financially with a donation:** as a non-profit organization, the more we raise, the further we can reach.
- **introducing us to educators:** sharing our mission, vision and resources
- **practising your own critical thinking skills:** it all starts with personal responsibility

Please visit our website for the latest:
www.openmindsfoundation.org

Omar Khan Sharif was found washed up on a beach with an unexploded bomb hidden in a book. Two weeks previously on April 3, 2003, he had been prevented from entering a nightclub with the bomb, but ultimately escaped while his partner killed four people and wounded fifty in Tel Aviv.

George Appleton was a man with a record of violence against women. In the UK in 2009, he murdered his ex-girlfriend Clare Wood who was just 36. Despite multiple reports made by Clare to police, an inquest into her death found that she was psychologically manipulated by Appleton and ultimately not given enough police protection. Her death gave rise to 'Clare's Law' giving more protection to the victims of domestic violence.

Ruth McGill lost her 15-year-old son when he refused an essential blood transfusion after being in a car accident. Despite direct medical advice, her son refused treatment on the basis of religious beliefs which questioned the morality of accepting blood. Subsequent research conducted by Ruth found that these "religious" recommendations were based on a misinterpretation of the Bible which church leaders favored over the wellbeing of the congregation.

Rachel Thomas thought that a well-dressed, charming manager was her ticket to a modeling career. Careful psychological manipulation over several months included withholding potential contracts and preventing Rachel from actually negotiating any agreement. She was eventually forced to work in a strip club to make ends meet, and was coerced into having sex with paying clients. Concern from her family led to Rachel's escape, but not before she had been manipulated into acts that were entirely against her background and core beliefs.



So who are these people and what do their stories have in common?

All are victims of coercive control (unethical persuasion), a manipulation technique which is gradually used to control and command victims to act against their own better interests.

Coercive control is almost completely unrecognized as a problem, but it is the key factor which connects these seemingly diverse stories. In fact, a large proportion of the chaotic events which are reported by modern media are a result of individuals and groups applying this technique.

The Open Minds Foundation is challenging coercive control through critical thinking education. Critical thinking teaches us to question what we are told, understand bias, and recognize the value of our own "gut feel". It won't protect everyone, but it will save many.

For more useful resources, please visit us at [**www.openmindsfoundation.org**](http://www.openmindsfoundation.org)