Coercive Control FAQ

1. What is coercive control?

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour used by an individual or group to dominate, intimidate, manipulate, or restrict another person's freedom and independence. It involves repeated acts of control that gradually undermine an individual's autonomy, confidence, and ability to make independent decisions.

Coercive control may involve psychological abuse, threats, intimidation, isolation, financial restrictions, surveillance, humiliation, and manipulation. It is commonly associated with domestic abuse, but it can also occur in families, cults, high-control groups, and other abusive environments.

2. How does coercive control work?

Coercive control generally develops through repeated patterns of behaviour rather than a single incident. The controlling individual may gradually establish authority by restricting the victim's choices, creating fear, undermining their confidence, and making them increasingly dependent.

Over time, the victim may begin changing their behaviour to avoid conflict, punishment, humiliation, or other perceived consequences.

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3. What are common examples of coercive control?

Coercive control can take many forms, including:

- Monitoring someone's movements and activities.
- Controlling access to money and financial resources.
- Restricting contact with family and friends.
- Dictating clothing, appearance, or personal behaviour.
- Monitoring telephone calls, messages, and online activity.
- Threatening physical, emotional, or financial harm.
- Using intimidation to enforce compliance.
- Humiliating or degrading someone.
- Controlling access to healthcare, education, or employment.
- Making someone feel responsible for the abuser's behaviour.
- Threatening to harm children, relatives, pets, or loved ones.
- Preventing someone from making independent decisions.

4. Is coercive control a form of psychological abuse?

Yes. Coercive control is widely recognised as a form of psychological and emotional abuse. It involves a pattern of behaviours intended to establish and maintain power over another person.

Unlike an isolated disagreement or argument, coercive control involves ongoing conduct that restricts another person's freedom, independence, and ability to exercise personal choice.

5. Is coercive control the same as domestic abuse?

No. The terms are related, but they are not interchangeable.

Domestic abuse is a broader category that includes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and financial abuse within domestic or intimate relationships.

Coercive control is a particular pattern of abusive behaviour that involves domination, intimidation, and restrictions on personal freedom. It can occur within domestic relationships but is not limited to them.

6. Can coercive control occur without physical violence?

Yes. Physical violence is not necessary for coercive control to occur.

An individual may use threats, intimidation, surveillance, financial restrictions, isolation, humiliation, and psychological manipulation to control another person.

In some circumstances, the victim may experience significant fear and loss of independence without ever being physically assaulted.

7. What is the difference between coercive control and coercion?

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Coercion generally refers to using threats, pressure, intimidation, or force to make someone do something against their wishes.

Coercive control describes an ongoing pattern of behaviour in which these methods, together with other controlling tactics, are used to dominate another person's life.

Coercion may involve an individual incident, whereas coercive control usually involves repeated behaviours that establish and maintain power.

8. How does coercive control affect a person's independence?

Coercive control can progressively undermine an individual's ability to make independent decisions.

A victim may begin seeking permission for ordinary activities, avoiding certain subjects, changing their behaviour to prevent conflict, or feeling unable to act without approval.

Over time, the individual may lose confidence in their own judgement and become increasingly dependent on the controlling person.

9. What is isolation in coercive control?

Isolation is a tactic used to separate an individual from sources of emotional, practical, and social support.

A controlling person may discourage or prevent contact with family members, friends, colleagues, or other supportive individuals.

Isolation can make it more difficult for victims to recognise abusive behaviour, obtain assistance, or leave a controlling environment.

10. How is financial abuse connected to coercive control?

Financial abuse is frequently used as a means of establishing and maintaining coercive control.

Examples include:

- Restricting access to bank accounts.
- Taking someone's wages or benefits.
- Preventing someone from working.
- Monitoring or controlling all spending.
- Creating debts in another person's name.
- Withholding money for essential needs.
- Preventing financial independence.

Financial restrictions can make leaving an abusive situation considerably more difficult.

11. Can coercive control occur within families?

Yes. Coercive control can occur within family relationships, including relationships between parents and children, adult children and parents, siblings, and extended family members.

It may involve intimidation, emotional manipulation, isolation, threats, financial exploitation, and the enforcement of rigid rules through fear or punishment.

Family relationships can make coercive control particularly difficult to recognise because controlling behaviour may be presented as discipline, protection, loyalty, or family obligation.

12. Can coercive control occur in cults and high-control groups?

Yes. Coercive control is relevant to understanding the behaviour of some cults and high-control organisations.

Groups may use authority structures, social pressure, isolation, threats, punishment, humiliation, and control over information to influence members' behaviour and restrict independent thought.

Possible tactics include:

- Discouraging contact with people outside the group.
- Punishing criticism or disagreement.
- Demanding unquestioning loyalty to leaders.
- Controlling access to information.

- Creating fear of leaving the organisation.
- Using shame or humiliation to enforce group expectations.
- Threatening rejection, expulsion, or other consequences for non-compliance.

Not every religious or alternative organisation engages in coercive control. The presence of a particular belief system or leadership structure alone does not establish abuse.

13. Can children experience coercive control?

Yes. Children can experience coercive control within families, institutions, and other environments where adults or authority figures exercise power over them.

Examples may include:

- Excessive monitoring and restrictions.
- Threats and intimidation.
- Emotional manipulation.
- Punishment for expressing independent opinions.
- Restricting relationships with supportive individuals.
- Using affection and approval as rewards for compliance.
- Making children feel responsible for an adult's emotions or behaviour.

Such experiences can affect a child's emotional development, sense of safety, self-esteem, and understanding of healthy relationships.

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14. What psychological effects can coercive control have?

The psychological effects vary depending on the circumstances, duration, and severity of the abuse.

Possible effects include:

- Anxiety and persistent fear.
- Depression.
- Low self-esteem.
- Hypervigilance.
- Social withdrawal.
- Feelings of helplessness.
- Difficulty making decisions.
- Loss of personal identity.
- Shame and self-blame.
- Difficulty trusting others.
- Symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress.
- Emotional and psychological dependency.

Some effects may continue after the individual has left the controlling environment.

15. What is the relationship between coercive control and trauma bonding?

Trauma bonding describes an attachment that may develop within an abusive relationship, particularly where periods of mistreatment alternate with affection, reassurance, or apparent kindness.

Coercive control can contribute to this dynamic by creating an environment in which the victim becomes increasingly dependent on the controlling individual for approval, reassurance, or a temporary sense of safety.

However, trauma bonding and coercive control are separate concepts. Not everyone experiencing coercive control develops a trauma bond.

16. Can coercive control cause learned helplessness?

It can contribute to experiences associated with learned helplessness.

Learned helplessness describes a psychological phenomenon in which repeated exposure to uncontrollable or adverse circumstances can lead an individual to believe that their actions will not change the situation.

Someone subjected to prolonged coercive control may eventually feel that resistance is pointless, that escape is impossible, or that they have no meaningful control over their circumstances.

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This does not mean the individual is weak or responsible for the abuse.

17. Why might someone find it difficult to leave a coercively controlling relationship?

Leaving a controlling relationship can be complicated by numerous psychological, financial, practical, and safety-related factors.

These may include:

- Fear of retaliation.
- Financial dependence.
- Threats against children or loved ones.
- Social isolation.
- Emotional attachment.
- Concern about losing housing or financial security.
- Fear of not being believed.
- Low confidence following prolonged psychological abuse.
- Threats involving self-harm or harm to others.

Leaving can also be a particularly dangerous period in some abusive relationships. Safety planning and specialist support may therefore be important.

18. Is coercive control recognised in law?

Yes. Coercive control is recognised in legislation in several countries, although the legal definitions and requirements differ.

In England and Wales, controlling or coercive behaviour can constitute a criminal offence under Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, as amended.

In the United States, there is no single federal criminal offence specifically covering all forms of coercive control. However, certain behaviours may fall under state domestic violence, stalking, harassment, assault, or other laws. Some jurisdictions also recognise coercive control in particular family-law contexts.

20. How can someone recover from coercive control?

Recovery involves rebuilding personal autonomy, confidence, safety, and independence.

Potentially helpful approaches include:

- Working with a trauma-informed therapist.
- Re-establishing supportive relationships.
- Learning to recognise abusive and controlling behaviours.
- Rebuilding financial and practical independence.
- Developing healthy personal boundaries.
- Relearning how to make independent decisions.
- Addressing anxiety, shame, and self-blame.
- Developing a safety plan where necessary.

Recovery is individual and may take time. Support should respect the person's autonomy and avoid recreating the controlling dynamics they have experienced.

21. Where can someone seek help for coercive control?

People experiencing coercive control may seek assistance from domestic abuse organisations, specialist support services, qualified therapists, legal professionals, and safeguarding organisations.

In the United States, the National Domestic Violence Hotline provides confidential support:

- Telephone: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).
- Text: START to 88788.

If someone is in immediate danger, they should contact emergency services when it is safe to do so.