Psychological Control FAQ

1. What is psychological control?

Psychological control refers to behaviours used to influence, restrict, or dominate another person's thoughts, emotions, decisions, and behaviour. It may involve intimidation, manipulation, humiliation, threats, isolation, or the deliberate undermining of someone's confidence and independence.

Psychological control can occur in personal relationships, families, workplaces, institutions, and high-control organisations.

2. What is the purpose of psychological control?

Psychological control is generally used to establish or maintain power over another individual. A controlling person may seek to influence how someone thinks, behaves, communicates, makes decisions, or interacts with other people.

In abusive situations, the objective may be to reduce an individual's independence and increase their reliance on the controlling person or group.

3. What are common forms of psychological control?

Common forms include:

- **Intimidation:** Using threats, aggression, or fear to influence behaviour.
- **Isolation:** Restricting contact with friends, family, or outside support.
- **Gaslighting:** Undermining someone's confidence in their memory, perceptions, or judgement.
- **Emotional blackmail:** Using guilt, fear, or obligation to obtain compliance.
- **Humiliation:** Using ridicule, degradation, or embarrassment to undermine self-esteem.
- **Surveillance:** Monitoring someone's activities, communications, or movements.
- **Threats:** Using actual or implied consequences to discourage independent behaviour.
- **Dependency creation:** Encouraging emotional, financial, or practical reliance.
- **Information control:** Restricting access to information or alternative perspectives.
- **Behavioural restrictions:** Dictating what someone can do, say, wear, or whom they can associate with.

4. What is the difference between psychological control and psychological manipulation?

Psychological manipulation involves influencing another person's thoughts, feelings, or behaviour through deceptive, exploitative, or emotionally coercive tactics.

Psychological control is broader and refers to the restriction or domination of another person's independence and autonomy.

Manipulation can be one of the methods used to establish or maintain psychological control.

5. Is psychological control a form of abuse?

Psychological control can constitute psychological or emotional abuse, particularly when it involves persistent intimidation, humiliation, coercion, exploitation, or restrictions on personal freedom.

An ongoing pattern of controlling behaviour can be damaging even when physical violence is absent.

6. What is coercive control?

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour intended to dominate another person and restrict their freedom.

It may involve intimidation, isolation, surveillance, financial restrictions, threats, humiliation, and psychological manipulation.

Rather than being limited to individual disagreements, coercive control involves a wider pattern of domination and the restriction of personal autonomy.

7. Can psychological control occur within families?

Yes. Psychological control can occur between parents and children, siblings, adult relatives, and other family members.

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Examples include excessive monitoring, intimidation, humiliation, unreasonable restrictions, emotional blackmail, and the use of guilt or fear to enforce compliance.

8. Can psychological control occur in romantic relationships?

Yes. In romantic relationships, psychological control may involve possessiveness, extreme jealousy, monitoring communications, restricting friendships, controlling finances, dictating personal decisions, or demanding constant reassurance.

A controlling partner may attempt to establish authority over many aspects of the other person's life.

9. Can psychological control occur within cults or high-control groups?

Yes. High-control groups may use a combination of psychological and social techniques to influence members and discourage independent thinking.

These practices can include:

- Restricting access to outside information.
- Discouraging relationships with non-members.
- Demanding unquestioning obedience to leadership.
- Punishing criticism or disagreement.

- Promoting fear of leaving the group.
- Controlling personal relationships and activities.
- Encouraging dependence on the group for identity and belonging.

Not every religious, spiritual, or ideological organisation uses these practices. The relevant consideration is the actual pattern of behaviour and control.

10. What is information control?

Information control involves restricting, filtering, or manipulating the information available to an individual.

A controlling person or organisation may discourage independent research, discredit outside sources, restrict communication, or present only information that supports its preferred beliefs.

This can make it more difficult for individuals to evaluate situations independently.

11. What is behavioural control?

Behavioural control involves attempting to regulate another person's actions and daily activities.

Examples may include controlling clothing, eating habits, sleep schedules, social interactions, employment, finances, hobbies, or personal routines.

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In abusive situations, these restrictions may be enforced through intimidation, threats, punishment, or emotional pressure.

12. What is emotional control?

Emotional control involves attempting to influence or regulate another person's emotional responses for the benefit of the controlling individual.

This may include making someone feel guilty for expressing disagreement, punishing emotional independence, dismissing legitimate feelings, or demanding that someone continually manage the emotions of another person.

13. What is dependency-based control?

Dependency-based control occurs when someone encourages or creates circumstances in which another individual becomes increasingly reliant upon them.

This may involve controlling access to money, transportation, housing, social support, information, or emotional reassurance.

Dependency can make it more difficult for an individual to challenge controlling behaviour or leave an abusive situation.

14. How does psychological control affect self-esteem?

Prolonged psychological control can undermine self-esteem and confidence.

An individual may begin to believe that they are incapable of making good decisions, that their opinions are unimportant, or that they cannot function independently.

Repeated criticism, humiliation, intimidation, and invalidation can contribute to these effects.

15. Can psychological control affect memory and perception?

Psychological control can affect how an individual interprets experiences and evaluates their own recollections.

For example, repeated gaslighting, contradictory explanations, and persistent denial of events may cause someone to question their memory or perception.

This does not mean that psychological control automatically causes memory loss. Memory difficulties can have many possible causes.

16. What is learned helplessness?

Learned helplessness is a psychological concept describing a condition in which repeated exposure to situations perceived as uncontrollable can lead an individual to believe that their actions will not change the outcome.

In abusive environments, repeated threats, punishment, or unsuccessful attempts to resist control may contribute to feelings of powerlessness.

The concept should not be used to imply that survivors are responsible for their circumstances or incapable of taking action.

17. What is compliance conditioning?

Compliance conditioning refers to processes through which an individual learns to associate particular behaviours with rewards, approval, punishment, or negative consequences.

For example, someone may learn to comply with demands because disagreement has repeatedly resulted in intimidation, humiliation, or withdrawal of affection.

This can contribute to patterns of automatic compliance or avoidance.

18. Can psychological control exist without physical violence?

Yes. Psychological control can occur entirely through non-physical behaviours, including threats, intimidation, manipulation, isolation, humiliation, and surveillance.

The absence of physical violence does not mean that an individual is free from abuse or coercion.

19. What are the warning signs of psychological control?

Possible warning signs include:

- Feeling unable to make independent decisions.
- Being afraid of disagreeing with someone.
- Constantly seeking permission or approval.
- Feeling guilty for spending time with other people.
- Having personal activities or communications monitored.
- Experiencing repeated criticism or humiliation.
- Losing contact with friends and family.
- Feeling responsible for preventing another person's anger.
- Changing behaviour to avoid punishment or confrontation.
- Feeling that personal freedom is progressively diminishing.

These signs should be considered in context rather than treated as proof of abuse in isolation.

20. Can psychological control cause long-term psychological harm?

Yes. Prolonged exposure to controlling and abusive behaviour may contribute to anxiety, depression, chronic stress, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, difficulties with trust, and trauma-related symptoms.

The severity and duration of the effects vary between individuals.

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21. How does psychological control differ from healthy boundaries?

Healthy boundaries establish limits around an individual's own behaviour, needs, and personal space.

Psychological control attempts to dictate another person's behaviour, restrict their choices, or undermine their independence.

For example, someone may establish a boundary by deciding not to participate in a conversation involving verbal abuse. A controlling person may instead demand that another individual stop communicating with friends because they disapprove of those relationships.

22. Can psychological control be difficult to recognise?

Yes. Controlling behaviour may develop gradually and can initially be presented as concern, protection, affection, guidance, or discipline.

Over time, restrictions may become increasingly intrusive, while the affected individual becomes accustomed to seeking permission or avoiding actions that might provoke a negative response.

23. How can someone protect themselves from psychological control?

Helpful steps may include:

- Maintaining connections with trusted individuals.
- Seeking independent advice and information.
- Keeping records of concerning incidents when safe.
- Establishing personal boundaries where possible.
- Accessing professional support.
- Developing practical independence.
- Seeking assistance from domestic abuse or specialist support organisations.
- Creating a safety plan if there is a risk of retaliation.

It is important to recognise that directly challenging a controlling person may sometimes increase the risk of harm. Safety should take priority.

24. Can someone recover from psychological control?

Yes. Recovery is possible. Individuals may benefit from rebuilding independence, reconnecting with supportive people, restoring confidence in their own judgement, and receiving appropriate trauma-informed support.

Recovery may involve learning to recognise unhealthy patterns, establishing boundaries, and developing a renewed sense of personal autonomy.

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25. Where can someone seek help?

Individuals experiencing psychological control may seek assistance from qualified mental health professionals, domestic abuse services, safeguarding organisations, or specialist services supporting survivors of coercive control and organised abuse.

Where there is immediate danger, emergency services should be contacted.

Important Note: *Psychological control exists in different forms and degrees. It is important to distinguish ordinary interpersonal disagreements and reasonable boundaries from persistent patterns of intimidation, coercion, manipulation, and domination. The impact on an individual's freedom, autonomy, and psychological well-being should always be considered.*