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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1352 Peace Orders and Protective Orders – Coercive Control

The Duluth Domestic Violence Power and Control Wheel is a great tool to help victims of abuse to understand the Power and Control Dynamic. Although the perimeter of the Wheel represents those forms of abuse (Physical and Sexual) which seem to be most often in the public eye, the inner workings of the Wheel outlines the many forms that abuse can take. For those suffering from coercive control, Control is at the core of the abuse cycle. More to the point, the strategies and methods abusers implement are among the “spokes” that represent the victimization of those who have lost their ability to live without fear of reprisal, domination, intimidation, isolation and economic and emotional abuse.

Coercive control robs the victim of their power to make decisions about something as simple as what to wear, how to talk, and what time to go to and from daily activities. “Life” for the coercively-controlled abuse victim gradually becomes so confining and manipulated that the abuser has all the power over them; the victim has no personal freedom whatsoever. The home, in fact, becomes a form of confinement and isolation from others--- a prison for the victim to keep them under control.

Victims of coercive control often have no physical signs of abuse. They frequently don’t have bruises, cuts and broken bones. They are told when, how and why to do something. Sometimes their food is withheld because they did not comply with some controlling edict. Their activities on the phone or computer are thoroughly scrutinized and sometimes cut off completely. Email, text and social media are often forbidden as it represents an avenue of communication with the outside world the abuser cannot fully control.

Control is the key here... no freedom of expression, freedom of thought or self-determining actions. The very civil rights we have as individuals are stripped from the abused and replaced with the agenda of the abuser. Personal freedom belongs to the abuser alone.

HOUSE BILL 1352 recognizes the domination and control of the victim through coercive behavior that strips the abused of their ability and freedom to make self-effectuating decisions. HB 1352 recognizes coercion as abuse and gives the victim an outlet to seek escape from the controlling behaviors that rob them of their own self will and provide them with a path to escape their abuser.

PLEASE SUPPORT HB 1352

Testimony in Support of House Bill : 1352
Peace Orders and Protective Orders – Coercive Control

You may think that if a person is safe from physical harm that current law is sufficient to protect someone from abuse. **YOU ARE WRONG.** Coercive abuse is more insidious than a shove or a punch that results in cuts, bruises and sometimes broken bones. Coercive abuse can be more invasive in one's daily life than any single act of physical or sexual violence. A coercive abuser uses an array of strategies to exercise power and control over another person, often without every laying a hand on them. Although coercive control tactics are recognized as forms of abuse throughout clinical psychology and in domestic violence recovery programs nationwide, there is currently **NO LAW** in Maryland that exists to protect victims of abuse who exhibit no visible marks.

Abuse, as defined in Maryland law, currently means any act that causes bodily harm or an act that places a person eligible for relief in fear of imminent serious bodily harm, assault, rape, or sexual offense, false imprisonment, or stalking. While these definitions of abuse are accurate, they are definitely incomplete.

If coercive control of an individual does not manifest itself by a show of blatant physical symptoms, how is it recognized as abuse of the victim? The Duluth Model of Power and Control in relationships, as provided in your testimony packet and shown on the placard, describes patterns of low-level violent behavior that constitute coercive control and abuse. Hidden beneath the outward signs of physical abuse are acts of intimidation, coercion, and threats of economic and emotional abuse, isolation, blame shifting, use of children as pawns and use of privilege over the victim. Victims of coercive control are often subjected to stringent control of their finances, control of their children, and control of their daily decision-making. This controlling behavior by the abuser forces the victim to act or behave against their will in the way the abuser directs. For the victim, coercive control becomes a prison where all independent thought and actions by the victim are stripped away by the domination of the abuser. As the abuse escalates, the victim is robbed of any personal freedom. Ultimately, the effects of coercive control leaves long-lasting emotional and psychological damage.

As a victim of coercive abuse/control, I experienced fear every day. My abuser stalked me at work, on the campus at the college I attend, at home and in public. Under threat of worse abuse, he forced me to remain in contact with him, to reveal my whereabouts at all times, and to meet him against my will. He used intimidation and emotional abuse to control where I went, who I saw, and who I spoke to on a daily basis. He jealously scrutinized everything I wore, said and did. Without my knowledge or consent, he made a key to my car and planted a tracking device in order to keep tabs on my movements. I lived in an upscale community in Howard County; this gave him ample opportunity to observe me from afar while I was out walking my dog or chatting with a neighbor. My neighbors saw him near my home at odd hours, day and night. When I reported him to the police, I was told there was not much they could do unless I could prove that he violated a law. My abuser knew this.... He mocked me and **BLAMED ME** for the abuse.

For **THREE YEARS**, my abuser threatened to hurt my loved ones, threatened to make me lose my job, and threatened to make me lose my home. He even took steps to interfere with my education, if I was non-compliant. The effect of the abuse became so weighty on my psyche and so serious in nature that I considered changing my name and leaving the area in an all-out

attempt to escape the prison he constructed for me with his coercive control. My every thought was to regain my personal freedom. I even considered suicide.

It wasn't until my abuser made threats of imminent physical harm via text messages was I able to obtain relief given the current definition of abuse in Maryland peace order and protective order statutes. HE FINALLY MADE A MISTAKE. Today, with the help of the State's Attorney in Howard County, the abuser is on probation for criminal telephone misuse. The coercive control I suffered for three long years propelled me to seek and obtain the right to conceal carry. He can no longer control me, but he is still out there.

I currently facilitate a blog for victims of coercive control giving women a sounding board to communicate with each other. BUT YOU CAN HELP MORE.....

COERCIVE CONTROL, as set forth in HOUSE BILL 1352, succinctly describes the abusive behaviors that constitute non-physical forms of abuse not currently addressed in Maryland law.

What does this proposed legislation do for women like me? This new language for the Peace Order and Protective Order statutes gives victims of coercive abuse a greater chance at protection, more incentive to report abuse and the possibility of breaking free from the prison of control whose warden is the abuser. With knowledge that Maryland recognizes this form of low-level non-impact violence, the victim has a greater assurance that the abuse will stop. Your support and passing of HOUSE BILL 1352 sends a clear and present message to the abuser that coercive control is NOT TOLERATED in Maryland.

PLEASE SEND A FAVORABLE REPORT FOR HB 1352 AND SUPPORT THIS IMPORTANT PROPOSED LEGISLATION.

TAKE THE CONTROL AWAY FROM THE ABUSER!!!!

Darlyn R. Alpert
Howard County, Maryland

How to Recognize Coercive Control

Medically Reviewed by Timothy J. Legg, Ph.D, PsyD., October 10, 2019

Written by: Cindy Lemothe HEALTHLINE online Magazine

You're probably familiar with some forms of domestic violence, such as physical or verbal abuse. There's a more subtle type of abusive behavior that's equally harmful.

Coercive control is a strategic form of ongoing oppression and terrorism used to instill fear. The abuser will use tactics, such as limiting access to money or monitoring all communication, as a controlling effort.

While this form of abuse is illegal in some countries, including the United Kingdom, since 2015, it's not considered illegal in the United States unless a crime has been committed.

Anyone can experience coercive control, but it's often grounded in gender-based privilege. Between 60 and 80 percent of women seeking assistance for abuse have experienced coercive control.

Here's a look at 12 major signs of coercive control, along with some resources that can help you get out of a bad situation.

1. Isolating you from your support system

A controlling partner will try to cut you off from friends and family or limit contact with them so you don't receive the support you need, says clinical psychologist Cali Estes, PhD.

Here are a few ways they do this:

- suggesting shared phone and social media accounts for convenience
- moving you far away from your family so that it's hard to visit them
- fabricating lies about you to others
- monitoring all your phone calls with your family and cutting the line off if anyone tries to intervene
- convincing you that your family hates you and doesn't want to talk to you

2. Monitoring your activity throughout the day

"Abusers pursue coercive control through attempts to make themselves omnipresent," says Wendy L. Patrick, PhD, a career trial attorney and expert in criminal law.

They do this by wiring your house with cameras or recording devices, sometimes using two-way surveillance to speak to you at home during the day.

"This invasive surveillance often extends to private areas, such as the bedroom and even the bathroom," notes Patrick, "adding an element of humiliation to what is already a clear boundary violation."

All of this allows them an added element of control and also serves as a reminder to you that they're watching.

3. Denying you freedom and autonomy

Someone exerting coercive control might try to control your freedom of movement and independence.

Some methods include:

- not allowing you to go to work or school
- restricting your access to transportation
- stalking your every move when you're out
- taking your phone and changing all your passwords

4. Gaslighting

"The abuser must always be right, and they will force the victim to acknowledge this," says Estes. They'll manipulate, lie, and gaslight to get their way and convince you that you're wrong.

Example

Say your partner comes home from work, expecting dinner to be served. They said they wanted steak before they left. When you serve dinner, they might throw it on the floor, scream, and yell that they wanted burgers, claiming that you're too stupid to follow simple directions.

You then find yourself questioning your own memory, apologizing, and re-making dinner.

5. Name-calling and putting you down

Malicious put-downs, name-calling, and frequent criticisms are all forms of bullying behavior.

They're designed to make you feel unimportant and deficient, says Melissa Hamilton, PhD, a criminologist and expert in domestic abuse.

6. Limiting your access to money

Controlling finances is a way of restricting your freedom and ability to leave the relationship.

Some ways they'll try to exert financial control include:

- placing you on a strict budget that barely covers the essentials, such as food or clothes
- limiting your access to bank accounts.
- hiding financial resources
- preventing you from having a credit card
- rigorously monitoring what you spend

7. Reinforcing traditional gender roles

Regardless of the type of relationship you have, your partner may try to make a distinction between who functions as the man and the woman in the relationship.

They'll attempt to justify that women are homemakers and mothers, while men are the breadwinners. Using this argument, they may coerce you into taking care of all the cleaning, cooking, and childcare.

8. Turning your kids against you

If you have children, either with the abuser or someone else, they may try to weaponize the children against you by telling them you're a bad parent or belittling you in front of them.

This attitude can create a rift in the relationship between you and your kids, and may make you feel powerless.

9. Controlling aspects of your health and body

They'll monitor and control how much you eat, sleep, or time you spend in the bathroom.

Your abuser may require you to count calories after every meal or adhere to a strict exercise regimen. They may also control which medications you're allowed to take and whether you go for medical care or not.

You may feel as though you're always walking on eggshells and that your body is no longer your own.

10. Making jealous accusations

Jealously complaining about the amount of time you spend with your family and friends, both on and offline, is a way for them to phase out and minimize your contact with the outside world.

They might also do this in an effort to make you feel guilty.

11. Regulating your sexual relationship

Abusers might make demands about the amount of times you have sex each week and the kinds of activities you perform. They may also demand to take sexual pictures or videos of you or refuse to wear a condom.

“The victims may come to an ‘understanding’ that if they do not comply with their perpetrators’ demands or desires,” Hamilton says, “then they may face significant consequences.”

12. Threatening your children or pets

According to Hamilton, if physical, emotional, or financial threats don’t work as desired, your abuser may try to use threats against others in an attempt to control you. For example, your kids or pets may be at risk.

This can look like:

- making violent threats against them
- threatening to call social services and say you’re neglecting or abusing your children when you aren’t
- intimidating you by threatening to make important decisions about your kids without your consent

- threatening to kidnap your children or get rid of your pet

How to get out

Coercive control is a pernicious form of domestic abuse that entraps you in a hostage-like situation. Regardless of the history with your abuser, even if it included some happy moments, you don't deserve this treatment.

Getting out of an abusive relationship can be complex, even more so when children are involved. But with a bit of planning, you can make a safe exit from the situation.

Here's what you can do:

- **Maintain communication with your support systems whenever possible.** This is important regardless of your abuser's displeasure, says Patrick. You should also make sure family and friends have all of your contact information and check in on a regular basis.
- **Call a domestic violence hotline regularly.** Keep track of where your nearest public phone is and periodically weigh your options with a professional. Our [resource guide](#) can provide you with more options.
- **Practice how to get out safely, and practice often.** If you have kids, teach your kids to identify a safe place, such as a friend's house or the library, where they can go to for help and how to call the police.
- **Have a safety plan.** "When deciding to leave, victims should have a plan regarding where to go and who to stay with," Patrick adds, "recognizing that the initial period of separation might be the most dangerous in terms of an abuser attempting to reconcile — through both legal and illegal conduct."

What Is Coercive Control in a Relationship?

By Lauren Paige Kennedy

FROM THE WEBMD ARCHIVES 

When does psychological menacing cross into domestic abuse?

“Coercive control” is used to instill fear and compliance in a partner, says Evan Stark, PhD, the sociologist and forensic expert who coined the term. This type of mistreatment follows regular patterns of behavior, and, according to him, “in the vast majority of cases” is employed “by men of women” who are involved in abusive romantic relationships.

“I’m not talking about the somewhat controlling boyfriend or husband here,” says Stark, author of *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. “Compliance is fear-based. If there’s no fear, there’s no coercive control. And that fear is very real.”

What Happens

The pattern goes like this: A woman meets a new love interest who seems especially keen on her. Flattered, at first she doesn’t mind when he involves himself in every detail of her life. He may show up at the office too much, or even pressure or force her into sex, but she ignores these red flags.

As the relationship progresses, so, too, does his obsessive monitoring of her. He reads her texts and emails. Stalks her. Tells her what she can and cannot wear. Isolates her from her family and friends. And controls her bank account so she can’t afford to leave.

If she resists, he employs low-level violence including slapping, arm-twisting, being dragged by the hair, even frequent sexual assault. He threatens to harm himself or the kids. She understands he will further hurt her, too.

How Common Is It?

According to Stark, coercive control is found in 86% of all reported domestic abuse cases. Only 14% of cases are now considered to be classic “battered women’s syndrome,” where the abused person has an obvious, serious injury such as a black eye or broken bone. And Stark says that while low-level physical abuse “isn’t likely to excite arrest or triage surgery in the ER,” it is relentless.

“In 40% of reported cases we see serial abuse, where a woman is subjected to physical assault several times each week,” Stark says. “These relationships last, on average, 5 1/2

years. That means the woman has endured being harmed with low-level violence dozens, if not hundreds, of times before it's over."

This form of psychological and physical abuse "can be found in institutions and religious cults," too, he adds, and "we sometimes see it in same-sex relationships, as well." But in general, the abused are female and their tormenters, men. The abused are usually not outwardly passive. Many are successful professionals who've lost personal autonomy even as their careers soar, and who may be too ashamed to seek help.

This is "not because women are less controlling, jealous, or abusive than men are," says Stark, but because women have "fewer opportunities" to engage in coercive control. Advancements in women's legal, social, and political rights may have actually enabled, rather than hindered, abusive men, Stark claims, because now they have more opportunities and resources to exploit, especially financial ones.

"Women are vulnerable because gains have not been sufficient. They may have formal legal equality now but not substantive equality." Stark points to the large gender pay gap that rises dramatically over the course of a lifetime, as well as to the big disparity in political representation in the U.S. "Not long ago a man only had to use physical violence to control his partner. Now, he can't solely rely upon that, so he crosses into the social space."

Stark's groundbreaking work led to recent legal shifts in the U.K. Much of Europe followed suit. As of December 2015, repeat offenders there who coercively control their partners risk a 5-year prison sentence.

The U.S. has yet to do the same. But victims' rights groups here do now recognize coercive control as a major pattern in domestic abuse.

Spot the Red Flags

Could you be a target of coercive control? According to Stark, these are recognizable signs that your relationship is an abusive one and it's time to seek help.

Obsessive monitoring. If your partner demands you exercise daily to stay slim, controls your wardrobe and diet, installs spyware into your digital devices, keeps you from other loved ones, and stalks your every move, move on.

Gaslighting. Abusers undermine the abused person's sense of sanity by insisting their lies are true, or by playing mind games such as moving a partner's parked car late at night so she can't find it in the morning.

Low-level violence. This includes constant physical abuse that leaves no scars and which generally won't put abusers behind bars in this country: shoving, pinching, hair-pulling, and choking, with the understanding it will escalate if resisted.

Sexual assault. A common tactic among abusers is forcing the abused to engage in nonconsensual sexual acts, often several times each week, using psychological and physical threats to destroy resistance.

Need Help?

Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-7233.

WebMD Feature | Reviewed by Brunilda Nazario, MD on May 23, 2017

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