

Abuse That's Hard to Recognize: Coercive Control

Intimate partner abuse that is often disguised as love

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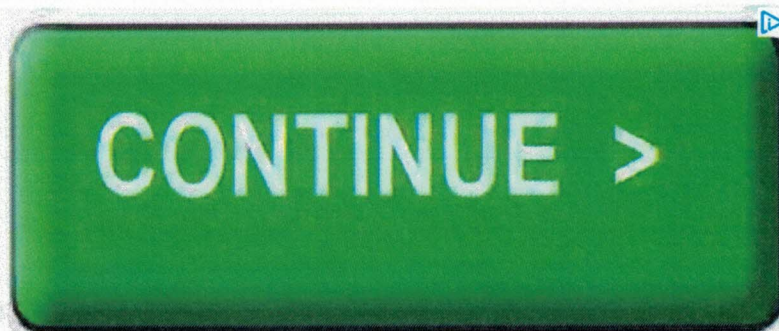
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Isolation. Threats. Humiliation. Sometimes even physical abuse. These are the weapons of coercive control, a strategy some people use against their intimate partners. A relationship that should involve loving support ends up as a trap designed for domination.

Although coercive control can show up in a variety of relationships, the most common situation is where a man uses coercive control against his wife or girlfriend. However, people of any gender and orientation can be victims or victimizers. Victims of coercive control grow anxious and afraid. Coercive control strips away victims' independence, sense of self and basic rights, such as the right to make decisions about their own time, friends and appearance.

notes



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Many abusers who use coercive control also abuse their partners physically or sexually, but some use coercive control without physical violence. Outsiders may not be able to see the signs of coercive control in a couple; those who use it are often quite charming.

Do you know someone who is being controlled in this way? Do you wonder if your partner is too controlling? Here's a self-assessment from my book, *Invisible Chains: Overcoming Coercive Control in Your Intimate Relationship*.

Victims of coercive control often feel like hostages. Over time, being grilled, criticized, stalked and monitored may come to seem routine and inescapable. Victims often blame themselves as they feel despairing and disoriented. It's easy for a person in this position to lose confidence and accept their partner's view of reality. They may feel confused as they are told again and again that they themselves have triggered their partner's behaviors by doing something wrong. At the same time, to keep the peace, victims may suppress their own desires, silence their voice and detach from loved ones. Unfortunately, victims typically do not see the connection between their partner's control and their own isolation until time has passed. Losing self-confidence and close relationships at the same time can be paralyzing.

People who get caught in the web of a controlling person are no different from others. They just have the bad luck to become involved with an abuser at a time when they are especially vulnerable. Typically, an abuser will lavish attention on a survivor at the beginning of the relationship. Over time, the abuser becomes jealous, monitors a survivor's whereabouts, and restricts his or her interactions with others. The survivor thinks the original "helpful partner" is the "real" person, and if the survivor does things right, the abuser will go back to being wonderful again. At times, the abuser may indeed act loving, if this seems like the best way to maintain control. Loving acts become another controlling tactic. Abusers will not change without intensive intervention.

Once a controlling person has caught a victim in his or her web, they will do everything they can to prolong the relationship. Sometimes they will threaten, stalk, assault or even murder the victim if he or she leaves or if the abuser suspects he or she is trying to leave. For this reason, even if there is no physical violence it is important for a person who is being controlled to contact a domestic violence agency and devise a safety plan.



Only a couple of decades ago, society gave a name to sexual harassment, dating violence, marital rape and stalking. The problem of coercive control needs to be similarly named and recognized, so we can eliminate it. We all need to learn more about coercive control, so we can offer the right kinds of support and not allow victims to become isolated. For more, see articles: [What is Coercive Control?](#), [My Experience with Coercive Control](#) and [More About Coercive Control](#).

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Illustration by Liz Bannish