

The Power and Control Wheel: A Domestic Violence Model

Physical and sexual violence reinforce behaviors that create a power imbalance in an abusive relationship

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Power and Control, with two hands with two human marionettes on strings

According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, it takes someone, on average, **seven attempts** to fully leave an abusive relationship. These statistics are staggering and often raise questions around why it's so hard to leave an abusive relationship.

The Power and Control Wheel was created by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs (DAIP) in 1984 to help educate abusers and illustrate the experience of the people they harm. The Wheel explains how the abuser gains power and control over the person they're abusing — and why it's so challenging to leave these relationships behind.

"Prior to the Power and Control Wheel, intervention was really focused on the idea that if we can manage someone's anger, we can manage domestic violence," explains registered psychotherapist **Natacha Duke, RP**.

"But the belief behind the Power and Control Wheel is that it takes more than anger management — that at the core of domestic violence, abusers have a sense of entitlement and a belief that they *should* be in control. The creators believed that educating the abusers and reaching this insight is needed for rehabilitation."

Duke breaks down each section of the Power and Control Wheel, how to recognize when these tactics are being used against you and what you can do to get help if you recognize any of these signs of abuse.

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What is the Power and Control Wheel?

The Power and Control Wheel serves as a diagram of behaviors and tactics that are used by someone to gain and maintain power and control in an abusive relationship. The wheel can be broken down into two parts:

- **The inner ring** of the wheel lists consistent (and sometimes subtle) ongoing behaviors that are used throughout the course of a relationship. On their own, these are considered unhealthy behaviors that can also happen in non-abusive relationships.
- **The outer ring**, marked by a thick black line, represents physical and sexual violence. The reason it's depicted this way is because it locks everything else into place and reinforces those behaviors in the inner ring.

“The important piece is that if any of the things that happened inside the wheel occurred in a non-abusive relationship, it would be a different situation than in a relationship where physical violence or sexual violence has happened,” clarifies Duke. “What I mean by that is if a husband or partner comes home and announces to their wife that he’s no longer going to do household chores, in a non-abusive relationship, where there’s never been violence or sexual violence, that would result in an important discussion.”

But when physical violence or sexual violence has been used — even once — it changes the response of the person who’s being abused because now they know that it can happen again.

“It changes your ability to share your thoughts and feelings because now, there’s this threat of violence,” explains Duke. “So, the result is that the victim becomes submissive and the abuser becomes more powerful and in control. It locks the victim into that reality, and at the same time, it makes the abuser feel more powerful and controlling. That’s why power and control are at the center of the wheel. Power and control are the goal of the abuser.”

“Domestic violence can happen to anyone — and it does — but it does happen more to women by men,” stresses Duke. “What’s really central to the original model is the idea of male-female relationships and men abusing women, and it was created to hold men accountable for that.”

The tactics of power and control

The tactics and behaviors listed inside the inner ring of the Power and Control Wheel are reinforced by acts of physical and sexual violence.

“It’s been found that when physical violence and/or sexual violence is used in a relationship, oftentimes, it’s not the thing that’s happening the most often. What’s happening most often are the tactics inside the wheel,” notes Duke.

Someone who enacts physical or sexual violence on you may present all of the behaviors listed, or they can present some behaviors in only different parts of the inner ring.

Not all eight tactics have to happen for a relationship to be abusive.

“Someone could only use three of them, or there might be something that’s being used in this wheel in a non-abusive relationship,” she continues. “There’s also going to be a lot of overlap between these tactics. Something can fit into more than one category.”

These tactics could be used for some time before sexual violence and/or physical violence occurs. Once there is a threat of either form of violence, these tactics maintain the imbalance of power and control:

Using coercion and threats

“One thing that is coercion or a threat that people don’t often think about is a look of warning,” shares Duke. “If a woman gets a nonverbal look of warning with a clenched fist or a threatening glance, that’s going to change her response if there’s been previous experiences of sexual and/or physical violence.” Other behaviors considered coercion or threats include:

- Threatening harm, including self-harm and suicide.
- Threatening to leave.
- Making you drop charges for domestic violence disputes.
- Making you do illegal things you don’t want to do.

Using intimidation

“Often, intimidation is about using their voice,” explains Duke. Intimidating tactics can be things like:

- Yelling.
- Threatening to tell your friends or other people in a public forum something private or personal that you don’t feel comfortable sharing.

- Breaking things or destroying property.
- Abusing pets.
- Displaying weapons.
- Pointing fingers.
- Crossing physical boundaries and getting up in your face.
- Using their size to dominate or talk down to you.

Using emotional abuse

“Emotional abuse is a big, broad category that covers a lot of behaviors,” says Duke, including:

- Playing mind games.
- Gaslighting.
- Humiliation.
- Making you feel bad about yourself.
- Making you feel guilty or ashamed for their actions.
- Putting you down in either private or public settings.

Using isolation

“Isolation tends to happen early on in an abusive relationship as someone tries to control you, make your life feel smaller, and prevent you from seeing friends and family,” explains Duke. “The idea is to limit your life so that you become reliant on them for support and you’re coerced into not leaving them even when you know you should leave them.” They do this by:

- Controlling who you’re allowed to see.
- Controlling who you’re allowed to talk to.
- Controlling where you can go.
- Deciding what you can do with your free time.
- Choosing what you’re able to read.
- Limiting your access to activities outside of the home.
- Using jealousy to justify their actions.

Minimizing, denying and blaming

“The idea here is to make everything else in this wheel feel like it’s not a big deal. It’s kind of the same idea as the cycle of abuse: They’re trying to make amends and trying to make everything better,” says Duke. They do this by:

- Denying what happened.
- Blaming their actions on you or other external factors.
- Minimizing the severity of what’s happened.
- Making you doubt your thoughts and feelings about what’s happened.

Using children or pets

“Anything that’s going to put children in jeopardy or worry you further is a tactic to gain power and control,” warns Duke. In the event there aren’t any children, they may harm, kill or threaten pets as a form of abuse instead. Other tactics in this category include:

- Threatening to harm children or take them away from their mother.
- Using children to relay messages during heated arguments.

- Telling children awful things about their mother and other information related to the intimate, private details of their relationship.

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Using economic abuse

"There is a lot of variation here in terms of what it could be, but it's basically about controlling how you spend money as a way to keep you dependent on them and a way for them to feel powerful," says Duke. Economic abuse includes:

- Controlling your finances.
- Not allowing you to have access to the family income.
- Not allowing you to work outside of the home or have your own income.
- Making threats that involve withholding food and/or shelter from you.

How to reclaim power and regain control

Leaving an abusive relationship is hard. If you recognize any of the signs of abuse, you're concerned for your safety or the safety of others, or you have experienced physical and/or sexual violence, help is available. Here's what you can do.

Understand what is happening

Although they are unhealthy behaviors, not every behavior listed in the inner ring of the Power and Control Wheel may be a sign of an abusive relationship. If you recognize one or a few of the signs in the inner ring that have happened to you, ask yourself if you have a **healthy relationship**.

"For example, is your partner being controlling about money, but the relationship is otherwise healthy? Is there space to communicate and resolve this challenge in a respectful and loving manner? Do you feel comfortable talking to them about it? Do you have enough trust and ease to be able to have that conversation?" poses Duke.

If the answer is that you *do* feel comfortable and safe talking to your partner about a problem *without* fear of physical and/or sexual violence, then having the discussion about what's working and what needs improvement is key. **Couple's therapy or marriage counseling** may also be beneficial for anyone who feels they may need a little extra help in navigating those more difficult conversations long term.

Talk to someone you trust

"If you *don't* feel you can talk to your partner about any one of these things or you see so many of these things happening, especially if there's been violence before, then I would really start to look at **speaking to somebody you trust** as a first step," stresses Duke. "One of the things that can happen in an abusive relationship is you can experience a lot of secrecy and shame. Saying it out loud and talking to someone is a really good first step if you're experiencing that."

Look to resources for domestic violence

There are many online resources and crisis hotlines available for you to gain more insight into what you can do to protect yourself and those you care about most.

Before you search for answers, know that **internet safety** is key when trying to end an abusive relationship. Using an incognito mode, a public computer at a library or clearing your browser history so your partner won't have access to your search history is an important precautionary measure to take.

Other helpful resources to consider include:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** This 24/7 hotline connects you with trained counselors for one-on-one private conversations about any mental health or crisis concerns you have.

- **National Domestic Violence Hotline:** This site offers a phone number, chatline or text messaging that will connect you with free confidential help, along with other resources that include healthcare, legal advice and local assistance providers.
- **NO MORE Global Directory:** If you live outside of the U.S., this is an important resource to have. This global directory provides hotlines, shelters, legal and psychological assistance, and other resources for almost every United Nations-recognized country and territory in the world.

Work on getting out

One of the things a domestic violence hotline might urge you to do is to **create a safety plan**. If the situation escalates and/or you decide to leave, having a plan in place that accounts for all the ways you can ask for help, the people who are your support system, where you can find emergency housing, where you can get legal advice, and how to get financial or food assistance is an important part of making sure you're safe and supported.

"They might ask you to think about the time of day this could happen, who to call, where to go and what transportation to use," notes Duke.

However you decide to start this journey of getting out of your abusive relationship, know that you're not alone. And no matter how long it takes for you to leave your current situation, there will be a day when you will regain power and control over your life again.

"Abuse happens all around the world. It can happen to anyone. So, it's really important to talk about it when it's happening and not keep it inside," she encourages. "That's really the first step to changing it."



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