



## Introduction to Coercive Control

*When 23-year-old Lily's boyfriend, Dave, started quizzing her about where she had been and she caught him examining her phone, she decided Dave was "a jerk" and broke up with him immediately. Dave texted her several times a day for a couple of weeks, and once she saw him sitting in his car outside her workplace. But that was the end of it.*

*Mandy, age 35, did not see her situation so clearly. After the whirlwind courtship in which Tom showered her with cards and flowers, Mandy married him. Then he started asking Mandy for details about how she had spent her day, with whom she had spoken and for how long. Tom complained about how much time Mandy talked on the phone with her mother and sister. They had their first real fight when Mandy arrived home with short hair, and Tom was angry that she had cut it without asking for his opinion. She promised to grow it long again. It seemed as if nothing she did pleased him. Over time, Mandy noticed fewer loving moments and felt increasingly anxious about Tom catching her doing "something wrong." With two children at home and feeling worse and worse about herself, Mandy felt trapped.*

Lily and Mandy were not simply unlucky in love; they were victims of coercive control. 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.

Coercive control shows up in a variety of relationships. This book focuses on the most common situation: where a man uses coercive control against a woman who is his partner in an intimate relationship. Chapter 5 discusses coercive control in same-sex relationships and in heterosexual relationships where the woman dominates the man.

Many men who use coercive control also abuse their wives and girlfriends physically or sexually, sometimes causing severe or even fatal injuries. Others limit themselves to slapping, pushing, grabbing, and other types of force that might look mild to outsiders who don't see how frequently they occur and the fear they cause over time. Violence is one among many tactics of a strategy of coercive control. Some men use coercive control without physical violence.

Coercive control can sometimes be found outside romantic and sexual relationships. Coworkers and supervisors sometimes use coercive control at the workplace. And we find a similar dynamic in cults and other organizations, on sports teams, and in the military, especially during basic training. However, intimate relationships are especially ensnaring. The controller may have access to the victim around the clock and knows her daily routine. He may also know things about her that she has shared with no one else, such as her secret hopes and fears. She may have told him about experiences that she does not want to become public. He uses these secrets to control and hurt her.

Outsiders may not be able to see the signs of coercive control in a couple. The men who use it often make a good impression in other settings. Much of society still thinks men's control over women is just the way things are, and that what happens in couples is their private business. All this adds to a woman's sense of being imprisoned by her partner.

**Coercive control is largely invisible.**

Victims\* of coercive control often feel like hostages. Over time, being grilled, criticized, and shamed may come to seem routine. Victims often blame themselves as they feel despairing and disoriented. It can be hard for them to figure out exactly what's wrong. Isolated and humiliated, some women lose confidence and accept their partner's view of reality. They may have trouble deciding whether their partners are doing and saying hurtful things out of love and concern—as claimed—or out of cruelty. 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 in their relationship, victims may detach from family and friends, contacting them less and less often until they lose touch with many of the people they care about most. Unfortunately, the 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.

**Victims of coercive control may be criticized, shamed, and punished regularly. They often feel like hostages.**

Women who get caught in the web of a controlling man are no different from other women. They just had the bad luck to become involved romantically with a controlling person at a time when they were especially vulnerable. Once a controlling man has caught a woman in his web, he will do everything he can to prolong the relationship.

Victims of coercive control come from all racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. They live in mansions, trailer parks, city apartments, and suburban and rural homes. Often victims of coercive control keep up a happy front because they feel ashamed or because their partner demands it. Sometimes other people sense that something is wrong, but are not sure what. The woman may appear unusually shy, lonely, meek, or even disturbed. It may be

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\*I am using the word "victim" here to stress the power dynamic. Readers who prefer another word such as "survivor" should feel free to substitute it.

obvious to other people that she is being controlled, or the control may remain perfectly hidden.

People who exert control often look charming on the surface. To outsiders, they may even seem like ideal partners when they take over all crucial decisions. Some abusers appear eager to help others, friendly, romantic, and outgoing, while others seem mean and let their possessiveness show. There is no easy way to spot a person who will someday begin to exercise coercive control over his partner.

When he first meets a woman he likes, a controlling man will often say he wants to support and help her. He may buy her gifts, listen to her stories, and offer her advice about her work and family. He may do chores for her. He may look at her with admiration and think of her success as an extension of his own. If she is with a man like this, a woman initially benefits from his caring and concern. Family and friends may comment about the positive aspects of the relationship, saying, "You are so lucky to have found this man. You will never find another man like him!"

A part of her may feel uneasy, wondering, "What will happen if I don't want to follow his advice?" She is apt to brush aside these feelings because she welcomes so much of what he offers. She will avoid making waves. The abuser has communicated that it is better to just "go along" with his ideas and avoid conflict.

If a man acts romantic, charming, and supportive at the beginning of the relationship, his partner thinks this helpful man is the "real" him, and if she does things right, he'll go back to being helpful again. He may briefly return to his helpful self for a while, if this seems like the best way to maintain his control.

Over time, things usually worsen. Some controlling men start to see the woman's success as competition or as somehow making their own achievements seem less important. Others insist that outside activities of any kind distract her from meeting their needs and attending to housework and children. Many become jealous of all contact with others, even of the time a woman spends with her family. Life becomes what is called a "zero-sum game," in which whatever a woman gains in achievement, respect, or friendship is

seen as taking away from her partner. The controlling man knows that if his partner grows and develops, she may refuse to put up with his restrictions. So he begins to stand in her way. His supportive advice turns into criticism. He acts like an expert on her life and career—as if he understands it better than she does. He views all of her outside involvements as signs of disloyalty.

A controlling man does not necessarily live with the woman he dominates. Sometimes he “dates” and controls her from a distance, by stalking her and disrupting her work and her relationships with friends and family. Because coercive control crosses so many spheres of a woman’s life, simply “leaving” or ending the relationship may not end the problem. His abuse may continue or even escalate after the relationship is over.

A controlling man has many ways to impede a partner’s progress. He blocks her access to the people and resources she needs to live her life on her own terms. He makes it inconvenient for her to study, discourages her from taking a promotion, or disrupts her work. He may interfere with her friendships and family ties, block her access to transportation, prevent her from learning new skills, and frustrate her attempts at self-improvement. Let’s look at three brief examples of how coercive control can block a woman’s advancement.

*Jocelyn wanted to take college courses when her youngest child started kindergarten. Her husband, Jay, wouldn’t hear of it, although this had been their plan when they married. He told her she needed to be available for their children in case one got sick during the school day. He discouraged her so strongly that she gave up her plans.*

*Christine decided she was drinking too much and wanted to give up alcohol. She told her husband, Ray, that she was going to stop drinking beer with dinner. Ray grew furious and accused Christine of trying to control him. On her first night without drinking, Ray refused to say a word during their meal. He accused her of behaving as if she was too good for him, and told her he hated to “drink alone.” He offered “a compromise.” She would drink with*

him at dinner, but he would stop her when she drank too much. Christine gave in and drank with him—it just seemed easier. In this way, Ray pushed Christine to abandon a goal, and made sure that her head was clouded by alcohol, hindering her ability to think about her future.

Teresa was a rising star in her city's painting world when she began to date Samuel, who also painted but earned his living waiting tables. Samuel was romantic but moody. Once, when angry, he threw a book at a wall. When he shouted at her, Teresa felt afraid. After a few months, Samuel moved his supplies into Teresa's studio space so he could work by her side. Samuel insisted they not paint on weekends, so they could devote themselves fully to each other. Teresa's painting suffered from Samuel's continuous presence and demands.

In couples where one person controls the other, the person who is being controlled cannot reach her full potential. Her partner stands in the way of her personal and professional growth.

**A controlled person cannot reach her full potential.**

She not only feels trapped, but she also increasingly adopts his world-view as her own, losing her sense of who she is as a separate person.

## THE CONTINUUM OF COERCIVE CONTROL

No single act defines coercive control. A number of acts occur together, and a pattern develops over time. This book describes coercive control in general and provides numerous examples of specific acts. Certainly not all controlling men exhibit every behavior mentioned here in its worst form. One man cooks for the family but restricts his girlfriend's friendships and forbids her to hold a job because of his obsessive jealousy. Another man takes away his wife's paycheck and controls every cent of their finances but does not interfere with her friendships. One man rarely raises his voice but often threatens his girlfriend with physical harm if

she does not do what he asks. Another insults his wife and keeps her from seeing friends and family but claims he would never hurt her physically. In coercive control, the abuser's moods, behaviors, and beliefs severely limit and alter his partner's. The overall concept of coercive control may describe a relationship even if not every example of bad behavior applies.

**The concept of coercive control may describe a relationship even if not every example of bad behavior applies.**

On the other hand, not every man who is “bossy” is guilty of employing coercive control. There are many degrees of bossiness. But if the woman feels actual fear—if she feels she must respond to his demands *or else*—then she is probably a victim of coercive control. If she avoids saying and doing things that are important to her, for the sake of keeping the peace and avoiding conflict, then she is probably a victim of coercive control. In coercive control, the abuser uses threats, punishment, and criticism to limit his partner's access to resources such as friends, family, work, money, and freedom of movement.

### Coercive control exists on a continuum.

**Noncoercive (cooperative) relationships:**

Mutual support and shared decision making. Arguments may surface. Neither partner frightens, threatens, or punishes the other. The couple balances connection and autonomy in a way that benefits both people.

**Coercive control relationships:**

One person uses a variety of tactics to control his partner. She buries some of her desires, plans, and opinions to avoid conflict and punishment. She may resist in hidden ways but grows increasingly isolated. She may experience physical and psychological symptoms.

**Coercive entrapment:**

Coercive control strategies are intensified by structural inequalities that further deprive victims of resources. The victim feels trapped, isolated, fearful, and threatened almost constantly. She may lose a sense of herself as an independent human being.

Not Coercive

Coercive Control

Coercive Entrapment

**Is someone controlling you?**

- Do you feel threatened?
- Are you afraid to speak up?
- Is your partner constantly jealous or possessive?
- Does your partner try to limit your contact with family or friends?
- Do you work hard to avoiding “provoking” a bad reaction in your partner?
- Do you feel ashamed of things your partner does to you or makes you do?

If the answer is “yes” to one or more of these questions, read on.

This book usually uses male pronouns to describe the controlling partner, and female pronouns to describe the person who is victimized, because these are the most common coercive control relationships. However, in no way should this book be seen as casting blame on all men. Most men do not control their female partners in the ways described in this book. Many men respect their partners and support their interests and work. Increasingly, men who live with their partners share housework and child care.

Men are also becoming involved in the fight against violence against women. Some do this formally, by joining antiviolence organizations, marching alongside women to “take back the night,” and speaking out in their schools, workplaces, and communities. Other men do this informally, by telling friends, neighbors, workmates and even men they do not know to “knock it off,” and stop being rude or unkind to women.

Readers may reject some of the terms used in this book, such as “controlling,” “abuse,” and “victim.” Even the term “coercive control” may feel uncomfortable. The word “partner” is an awkward way to describe a wife, husband, boyfriend, girlfriend, or fiancé, but it’s easier than providing that long list each time. Please do not get caught up in the terms. If you can relate to a situation but don’t like the term, feel free to substitute another word that you think fits better. Most important here is to recognize when one person’s pattern of behavior is making

his partner feel afraid and humiliated with the consequence that she sets aside her own hopes and dreams just to get through the day without conflict.

People in same-sex coercive control relationships will find that almost all of the content here applies to their situations, even though many of the examples portray heterosexual couples.

Fortunately, it is possible for victims to break free of coercive control through their own actions, with the support of people who care. This book explains how to do it. The process builds on the steps that a victim is already taking to stay safe and limit the damage to her life and her self-esteem. As advocates, therapists, police officers, medical providers, clergy, and the legal community begin to understand coercive control, they will be better prepared to support the victims who need their help. They will also be ready to step in sooner and tell a controlling man that he must *stop* his abusive actions and respect his partner's humanity.

**Victims can break free of coercive control through their own actions. This book will show you how.**

## COERCIVE CONTROL IN CONTEXT

Not very long ago, other kinds of interpersonal abuse were finally recognized as social problems, named, and considered crimes for the first time. This is an important step toward eliminating them. For example, today we identify violence against a romantic or sexual partner as "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence." We define sexual assault in intimate relationships as "acquaintance sexual assault," "date rape," or "marital rape." Stalking was described and made a crime, not only for Hollywood stars who are pursued by fans, but also for people who know each other. Recently, stalking laws have been extended to protect current and former intimate partners. Sexual harassment in schools and jobs oppressed women for centuries before people finally understood it, named it, and said, "Enough is enough." In 2014, sexual assault on college campuses and in the military gained new visibility.

Statutes and structures are finally being directed toward eliminating sexual assault in these institutions. We can see progress in combating those destructive forms of behavior. Now, at last, the time has come to shed light on *coercive control* in intimate relationships.

Those of us who work with victims of abuse in couples often hear that “the violence isn’t the worst part.” Attacks on self-esteem and independence can hurt as much as physical blows. These forms of social and psychological violence have recently been gathered together under the term “coercive control,” one of the most common and devastating forms of abuse. Coercive control is usually supported by gender traditions that support men’s power over their female partners.

Controlling another person is the foundation of all abusive relationships, including those that are physically violent. In many countries, including the United States, certain elements of coercive control are considered a crime. These include physical and sexual violence, criminal harassment, kidnapping, and stalking. Other behaviors—such as frequent telephone calls or showing up at a person’s workplace—are not crimes by themselves, but they can be included in protection or restraining orders, which does criminalize them. In recent years many countries

**Controlling another person is at the root of all abusive relationships, including those that are physically violent.**

have broadened their definitions of partner abuse to include coercive control. For instance, in some European nations coercive control is considered a “course of conduct crime.” This means that a series of harmful actions add up to a crime, even when a single incident of the same behavior is not illegal. In the United States, coercive control is not yet written into criminal codes, but this may soon change.

In couples where coercive control violates the victim’s human rights such as freedom of movement, it should be considered a crime and should be handled by the police and the courts. In other couples, the control may be unkind and morally wrong, but it has not yet crossed a line where it would be considered a crime. Still,

victims do need help and protection. Victims who become isolated are more likely to have their situations worsen. Concerned friends and family and social services can help end the victimization. They can help the victim understand her situation and provide her with material assistance to end the relationship, if she so chooses. It is also important for communities to change the norms around how men treat their wives and girlfriends, pressuring abusers to respect their partners' humanity.

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