

Abuse That's Hard to Recognize: Coercive Control Intimate partner abuse that is often disguised as love

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.

Many men 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 woman at the beginning of the relationship. Over time, he becomes jealous, monitors her whereabouts, and restricts her interactions with others. His partner thinks the original "helpful man" is the "real" him, and if she does things right, he'll go back to being wonderful again. At times he may indeed act loving, if this seems like the best way to maintain his control. Loving acts become another controlling tactic. [Abusers will not change](#) without intensive intervention.

Once a controlling man has caught a woman in his web, he will do everything he can to prolong the relationship. Sometimes he will threaten, stalk, assault or even murder her if she leaves or he suspects she's 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.