



Coercive and controlling behaviour

1 What is it?

Coercive control is a term used to describe a pattern of behaviour which seeks to take away the victim's sense of liberty or freedom, to strip away their sense of self. It includes a wide range of controlling acts including manipulation, isolation, intimidation, sexual coercion, humiliation, gaslighting (a form of psychological abuse in which a victim is manipulated into doubting their own memory, perception and sanity).

Victims, their family, or professionals do not always realise they are a victim.

2 Why it matters

Coercive control is a crime (Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015) which carries a maximum penalty of 5 years imprisonment and a fine. It is a key factor present in lots of situations – domestic abuse, child safeguarding, adult safeguarding, harmful practices, modern day slavery, 'mate' crime, and radicalisation.

It is still not always recognised by professionals. Coercive control has featured as a key factor in a number of Sefton Domestic Homicide Reviews. A lack of sufficient multi agency information sharing and professional curiosity contributed to coercive control not being adequately addressed in these cases.

“**Coercive control is the biggest predicting factor for intimate partner homicide**”

3 Key points

It can often start through grooming; the perpetrator will seek out vulnerabilities and attempt to fulfil unmet needs in the victim. Perpetrators are often described as initially charming but will soon start to exhibit controlling behaviours which eventually completely take over the freedom and identity of the victim. Perpetrators will target children or adults, as well as families, friends and professionals.

Coercive control is not about a single incident; it's a purposeful pattern of behaviour that takes place over time.

4 What are the signs?

- ▶ **Isolation** – an important step for the perpetrator is to separate the victim from supportive people and networks. This can include manipulation of friends, family, professionals and children.
- ▶ **Extreme Jealousy** – the perpetrator may control the appearance of the victim with the intention of avoiding others paying attention to them, e.g. controlling how they dress or how they do their hair.
- ▶ **Surveillance or monitoring** – e.g. checking social media, phone, informing the victim they are being watched, stalking.
- ▶ **Degradation/humiliation** – this can be through verbal abuse in front of others, putting the victim down, or through sexual abuse.
- ▶ **Financial abuse** – control can be through control of finances, e.g. taking the victim's money and giving them an allowance, or limiting what they can spend money on.
- ▶ **Threats and intimidation** – to keep the victim under their control, a perpetrator may use threats and intimidation, such as threatening their own, or their family's, safety.
- ▶ **Withholding items from a victim** – e.g. food, money, passport, contraceptives, sanitary products, medication.

“ Coercive control is when you do something not because you really want to, but because you are scared of what will happen if you don't ”

5 What's the effect?

This behaviour has a major effect on a victim. It may create a dependence on the perpetrator which makes it difficult for a victim to see a way of breaking away from them. Victims also face increased levels of suicide, self-harm, substance misuse, deterioration of mental health and risk of death. Risks to children include emotional and physical abuse.

6 What can you do?

- ▶ Ensure you know the signs of coercive control.
- ▶ Use professional curiosity to find out more about the situation.
- ▶ Be confident in asking questions.
- ▶ Believe disclosures made and adopt an understanding, non-judgemental approach.
- ▶ Gather information and share appropriately to enable risk assessment and relevant response.
- ▶ Remember the voice of the adult and the child (where relevant).

7 Further information

For further information on help and support available visit:

www.sefton.gov.uk/domestic-abuse