

Coercive Control: An Overview with Guidelines for Discussion

What we learned by listening to survivors of intimate partner violence

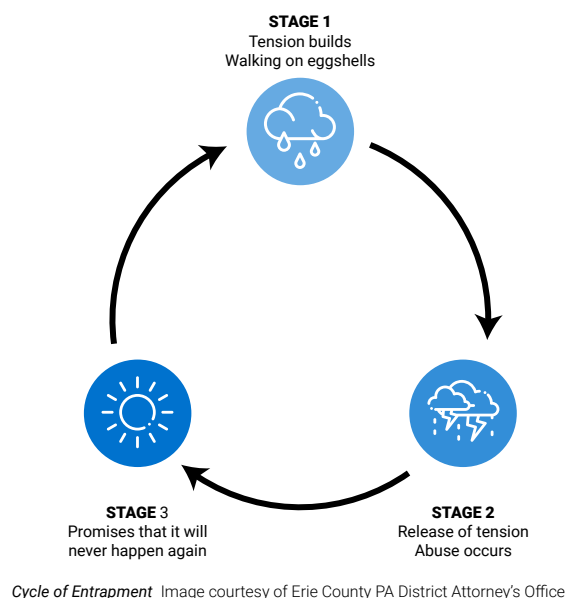
By the Rev. Tracy Lauersen

Coercive control describes a pattern of behavior by someone who wants to have power over their intimate partner and uses a range of tactics to achieve and maintain that power. They may manipulate, threaten, pressure and use intimidation to control their partner. They may use physical or sexual violence, but they may also control their partners' behavior through psychological, emotional, financial, spiritual and social forms of control.

In the past, most of our laws and consequently our understanding of intimate partner violence, focused on a single physical act or incidence of violence between partners in an intimate relationship – an occasion where a partner did something that left physical damage: a broken limb, a concussion, a cut, a bruise, a scar. What we didn't understand until we started listening to survivors of intimate partner violence was that these acts of violence were usually preceded and held together by patterns of long-term controlling behavior. Control was exerted through a range of ultimately demeaning tactics like initial love-bombing, emotional manipulation, stalking, tracking, social isolation, financial control and insults and actions that wore down their partner's confidence and autonomy.

As those who worked with victims started to develop their understanding of these patterns of control in intimate relationships, they grappled with describing this ongoing pattern of abuse with names like *intimate terrorism*, *patriarchal abuse* and *psychological and emotional abuse*. We now recognize that these ongoing patterns, campaigns or regimes of controlling behavior in an intimate relationship themselves constitute intimate partner violence. We recognize these acts of subjugation almost always precede physical and sexual violence. We now call this pattern of controlling behavior "coercive control."

Sadly, when we break down coercive control patterns into the data that we have on specific forms of violence like emotional abuse, financial abuse, stalking and sexual and physical abuse, we know that these are widespread problems with women far more likely to be victims and men more likely to be perpetrators. Coercive control is a pattern of behavior that is upheld by unhealthy stereotypes and social expectations of women and girls. (Statistics from the author's country of Australia [can be found here.](#))



"They isolated me, gaslit me; they monitored my phone calls, my emails. They'd 'borrow' my laptop. They'd control when I watched TV, went to sleep, went to church, saw my family...For all our married life, they controlled the money. I had no autonomy or independence. They'd humiliate me at church, joke about my 'infantile' faith."

(excerpts from the [National Anglican Family Violence Research Project](#))

The long-term impact of coercive control on victims can be profound and may endure long after the relationship ends. Even for the most resilient, such chronic forms of violence can leave lifelong scars.

Coercive control is different from other forms of abuse in the following ways:

- It's an ongoing pattern rather than a one-off incident.
- Its primary methods of control often exclude physical or sexual violence and focus on tactics such as emotional manipulation, surveillance, gaslighting, financial control and social isolation.
- The context for these tactics is everyday life and is often associated with women's roles as mothers, homemakers and sexual partners.
- It is subtle and indirect rather than overt and direct and sometimes victims may not recognize the dangerous situation being created in their relationship.
- It targets the victim's autonomy, agency and identity.

Healthy relationships are very different from ones that are characterized by coercive control. Healthy relationships are built on mutual trust and honest communication; in healthy relationships, people handle conflict with respect for the other partner. Healthy relationships are characterized by emotional support and empathy, equality and fairness. They respect each individual's boundaries. Physical intimacy is mutually satisfying. There is support for personal growth. Healthy relationships balance togetherness and independence.

All of us want to control things in our lives to some extent, but controlling another person through coercion and threats is not right. We are not created to dominate, control and manage the daily lives of our partners.

Discuss

1. Where have you experienced or witnessed coercive control in a job, school or institution? Was it ever addressed? Why or why not?
2. Where have you experienced or witnessed coercive control in a relationship? Was it ever addressed? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe our faith community is called to respond to this crisis in the same way we respond to other needs in our community, such as hunger, housing and other justice issues? Why or why not?

Pray

Creator God, as Christians, we know how far human relationships and intimate relationships fall short of the ideal for which we were created. We are all created in your image. The disrespect of one's partner through coercive control and its power tactics is a tragic and sinful rejection of ones whom you love. It is a denial of their inherent value as your image bearers. It is a self-gratifying power play. Jesus showed us a better way. He pushed back against unhealthy societal norms that saw women disrespected. He felt under no obligation to insist on his power in any relationship. We resolve to follow his lead to recognize and embrace our own worth as those created in your image and to acknowledge our responsibility to see the worth in others and to treat them with respect, especially those with whom we share our lives. We pray especially for victims of coercive control. *Amen.*

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