



Coercive Control

7. Responding and Supporting Safely

Responses should be victim-centred and trauma-informed, recognising the complexity of coercive control. Practitioners should avoid blame and support individuals at their own pace.

Safety planning and referral to specialist services, such as IDVAs, are key for those at risk. Multi-agency approaches, including managing repeat perpetrators, are essential to reduce harm.

Early identification and coordinated action are critical, as coercive control is often present in the most serious cases.

6. Professional Curiosity in Practice

Because coercive control is often hidden, professional curiosity is critical. Practitioners should look beyond what is presented and explore how relationships function day to day. Perpetrators may also attempt to extend their control to professionals. This can include presenting as credible, minimising concerns, or raising allegations about the victim. This may increase the victim's fear that they will not be believed and can further reinforce control. In some cases, perpetrators may deny behaviour, shift blame onto the victim or position themselves as the one being harmed. This can make it harder for professionals to identify the true nature of the abuse.

It is important to ask open, respectful questions about decision-making, access to money, and ability to maintain relationships. It is important to notice patterns such as someone being consistently accompanied, minimising concerns, or appearing to have limited autonomy.

Disguised compliance can occur, where everything appears stable but underlying control remains. No single agency will see the full picture, so information sharing and partnership working are essential.

5. Identifying Risk and Patterns

Coercive control is rarely identified through a single incident. Instead, it becomes visible when practitioners look at patterns over time, including how behaviour is changing, escalating or becoming more restrictive.

Risk is dynamic rather than static, meaning someone who appears low risk at one point can quickly become high risk, particularly during key trigger points such as separation, pregnancy, or increased attempts by the victim to regain independence. Escalation may show through increased monitoring, threats, intimidation, or tightening control over finances and daily activities. This may include threatening to remove children, undermining parenting, using contact arrangements to continue harassment, or sharing inappropriate information with children to influence their views of the other parent. Practitioners should pay close attention to the impact on the victim, not just the perpetrator's actions. Evidence of fear, behavioural changes, or loss of autonomy can indicate high levels of risk.

The DASH risk assessment tool supports structured conversations to identify high-risk cases. A high-risk score (14+ ticks) should trigger multi-agency intervention, including referral to MARAC. Where there are multiple perpetrators, each must be assessed individually, as the level and type of risk may differ. Professional judgement remains key—risk assessment depends on context, patterns and effective information sharing.

1. What is Coercive Control?

Coercive control is a type of domestic abuse where one person seeks to control another through a pattern of behaviour.

The abuser may use violence, threats, humiliation or intimidation to frighten the victim and make them comply with what they want. This behaviour is ongoing and often sits alongside other forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse.

The government defines controlling or coercive behaviour as:

- Acts designed to make a person feel inferior and/or dependent, often by isolating them from friends, family and support networks
- Behaviour that exploits money or resources, reduces independence, and controls daily life
- Assault, threats, humiliation, intimidation or other abuse used to harm, punish or frighten the victim

It is about power and control over time, not just isolated incidents.

2. How Coercive Control Works

Coercive control usually develops gradually. A relationship may begin positively, but over time the perpetrator introduces controlling behaviours such as monitoring movements, restricting contact with others, or controlling finances. Victims may also feel unable to leave due to the perpetrator placing emotional responsibility on them, for example suggesting they would not cope or remain safe if the relationship ended. Coercive control could also include monitoring movements, checking devices or requiring constant contact throughout the day.

Victims often begin to change their own behaviour to avoid conflict, which can make the abuse less visible. Over time, this may lead to a distortion of reality, where the victim blames themselves or struggles to recognise what is happening.

The [Power and Control Wheel \(Duluth Model\)](#) helps explain this pattern. It shows how tactics such as isolation, emotional abuse, intimidation and economic control work together to maintain dominance. Physical violence may be present, but it is often only one part of a wider pattern.

3. The Impact on Victims and Children

Coercive control has a significant and often hidden impact. Victims may experience loss of confidence, fear, anxiety and a reduced sense of identity. Many describe constantly adjusting their behaviour to avoid triggering abuse. They may be made to question their own memory or judgment through repeated denial of events or distortion of reality.

Trauma affects how people think, feel and respond. This can include difficulties with memory and concentration, emotional numbness, or heightened fear responses such as fight, flight, freeze or fawn.

Children are victims in their own right. Coercion can also involve children being used as pawns, particularly in co-parenting arrangements, where contact, communication or decision-making may be used to continue control and abuse. Living in an environment of coercive control can significantly impact their emotional wellbeing, development and future relationships. The harm is not only from what they see or hear, but from the wider environment of fear and control.



4. Barriers to Leaving

Leaving a coercive and controlling relationship is rarely straightforward and can increase risk. Separation is a known point at which abuse may escalate, including risk of serious harm or homicide.

Victims may face barriers such as financial dependence, housing needs, fear of the perpetrator, and concerns about children. Emotional attachment and trauma bonding can also make it difficult to leave.

Many victims seek help multiple times before receiving effective support, and some may not report to services at all. This means practitioners may be working with individuals who are not ready or able to disclose the full extent of abuse.