

Dr Emma Katz's At-A-Glance Guide to Coercive Control

Here are my expert definitions and explanations, with quick, accessible answers to all the main questions about coercive control



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Dr Emma Katz is widely regarded as one the world's foremost academic experts in her area of research — how coercive control impacts on children and young people.

*Emma specializes in the harms caused by father-perpetrated coercive control, as well as children's and mothers' resistance and recovery. Read more in her book **Coercive Control: Mothers' and Children's Lives**, published by Oxford University Press.*

Welcome

As you may know, this Substack gets into a lot of depth about coercive control. It provides a fuller picture by shedding light on the complexities, the twists and turns and the revealing insights that might easily be ignored.

But every so often it is important to step back and to cover the fundamentals.

Every year, new victims-survivors start to wonder — Am/was I a victim? Was that relationship actually coercive control? Was I abused, or am I over-reacting?

And every year, people who've known for a long time that they did experience coercive control want to find new ways to reach out and help people going through this now. They want to know how best to raise awareness.

This post provides an essential resource to help people answer questions and take action.

A warning: Please DON'T show this post to someone who you think might be a perpetrator. Perpetrators escalate their abuse when victims-survivors or those who care about them start to realize the truth about their abuse. They either become extremely manipulative (including by being “nice” for a while to give false hope that things have got better, which dangerously delays victims-survivors from leaving and causes

victims-survivors to experience more abuse), or they become extra obviously violent and abusive, which puts the victim-survivor in more danger.

Instead, if you think you might be experiencing coercive control, reach out for support without the perpetrator knowing. Quietly start planning a safe exit. You don't have to use an exit plan now if you aren't ready to, but have it in place.

Helpline numbers:

U.S. National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1.800.799.SAFE (7233)

U.K. National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247

Australia Respect National Helpline: 1800 737 732

The post is organized in a Q & A format designed to provide at-a-glance answers to key questions. Questions we will cover include the following:

- What is coercive control and how does it relate to domestic violence?
- What kinds of abuse does coercive control involve?
- How much does coercive control affect women, compared with men?
- Is coercive control illegal?
- In coercive control, what is the definition of the words “coercive” and “control”?
- What is the relationship between coercive control and violence?
- How can perpetrators get high levels of control over victims-survivors without use of violence?
- In what ways can coercive control affect children?
- What are some red flags in your partner's behavior that strongly indicate that you are a victim of coercive control?

- If you are a victim of coercive control, what might be the signs of this in your own behavior, feelings and experiences?
- What are the signs of post-separation coercive control?
- If you are worried about someone who you think is a potential victim, what might be the signs that indicate their partner/former partner is coercively controlling them?

I hope you find these answers concise and useful.

What is coercive control and how does it relate to domestic violence?

Coercive control is at the heart of domestic violence.

The term “coercive control” describes the system of abuse that domestic violence perpetrators use over a long period of time to gain dominance, to entrap the victim-survivor, and to make the victim-survivor change to their behavior in ways that make their lives smaller, more vulnerable and more dedicated to serving the perpetrator.

The term also describes the abuse that most perpetrators continue to commit post-separation. Perpetrators use post-separation coercive control to maintain control over a former partner, or to punish the former partner for escaping from them.

What kinds of abuse does coercive control involve?

Coercive control involves patterns of behaviour that play out over time. The following 20 components tend to be present in cases of coercive control. Not every component is present in every case:

1. Intimidation and threats
2. Emotional and psychological abuse
3. Physical abuse

4. Sexual abuse
5. Economic and financial abuse
6. Isolation
7. Controlling food and eating
8. Controlling access to shelter and basic amenities
9. Controlling personal care
10. Controlling clothing and appearance
11. Micromanaging time and activities
12. Reproductive abuse
13. Abuse around pregnancy, birth, birth recovery and breastfeeding
14. Spiritual, religious or cultural abuse
15. Minimizing and denying the abuse
16. Blaming the victim-survivor for the abuse
17. Manipulation, including by being “nice”
18. Tracking, monitoring, harassing and stalking
19. Technology-facilitated abuse
20. Legal abuse and systems abuse

How much does coercive control affect men, compared with women?

Data indicate that the vast majority of coercive control perpetrators are men and victims-survivors are women. So men can be victims, and some men are victims, but there are far more women who are victims.

Of all those [legally convicted](#) for controlling and coercive behavior in England and Wales, where coercive and controlling behavior has been a criminal offense since

2015, approximately **97% are male**.

[Myhill](#) (2015) found that **30% of women** and **6% of men** in their U.K. study had experienced coercive control. Myhill's study analysed data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales. This survey doesn't rely on charges or convictions, it gathers data directly from the population about what crimes they have experienced.

[Johnson](#) and colleagues (2014) found that **22% of women** and **5% of men** in their US study had experienced coercive control from *ex*-partners

[Nikupeteri](#) and colleagues (2021) found that out of everyone taken to court in Finland for stalking their *ex*-partner with whom they had children, **94% were fathers** and **6% were mothers**. Why does this matter? Because stalking is a key tactic used by coercive controllers to monitor and intimidate victims-survivors.

Therefore, when it comes to coercive control, there is much evidence to suggest that women constitute only a small percentage of perpetrators and men constitute a small percentage of adult victims. Coercive control is primarily a male-perpetrated form of abuse. It is also important to note that LGBTQ+ people can experience or perpetrate coercive control.

All victims-survivors should be offered the support they need.

Is coercive control illegal?

In some places, coercive control is recognized in law. Some countries, states and territories have made coercive control against a partner, *ex*-partner or family member a criminal offense.

Some countries have recognized coercive control in other ways, for example by including it in divorce laws.

Check with your local domestic abuse services or do an internet search to find out the laws where you live.

If you are worried someone could be tracking your internet use, take steps to avoid detection such as borrowing the phone of someone you trust or using a computer at a library.

In coercive control, what is the definition of the word “coercive”?

In coercive control, the victim’s-survivor’s actions are being shaped by coercion.

The word “coercive” in coercive control refers to the ways that a perpetrator will have unreasonable expectations and demands of the victim-survivor and will inflict punishments on the victim-survivor if they don’t comply.

The perpetrator’s coercive message to the victim-survivor can be summarized as “Do what I say, or else.” An important aspect of this coercion is that perpetrators do not always simply state what the victim-survivor can and cannot do (though sometimes they do just straight up state it). They can also reinforce their expectations and demands in more subtle, hard to spot ways, such as having a very negative reaction when the victim-survivor does something, so the victim-survivor adapts and avoids doing that thing in future.

In coercive control, what is the definition of the word “control”?

The “control” in coercive control refers to the many ways that perpetrators have demands and rules around what victims-survivors can and can’t do in their everyday lives.

Examples of control include interfering with victims’-survivors’ ability to contact family and friends, controlling their clothes and hair, dictating under threat of

punishment how they can cook, tidy and clean, and controlling where they can go and who they can speak to. Perpetrators monitor victims-survivors regularly to check if they are complying.

What is it that defines the ways that coercive control perpetrators “punish” victims-survivors?

The punishments that perpetrators inflict on victims-survivors can be actions that leave the victim-survivor exhausted, impoverished, upset, scared or physically harmed. These will be acts that the victim-survivor will be afraid of or will find distressing and harmful.

Increasingly, the victim-survivor will comply with the perpetrator's unreasonable requirements in order to avoid these punishments being inflicted on them. They will feel that saying “no” to the perpetrator or ignoring their demands is a safe option.

A victim-survivor going through this may not apply the word “punishments” to the situations themselves. They may use words like “consequences” instead. It is common for victims-survivors to say they “just knew” what would happen if they displeased or disobeyed the perpetrator.

What is a good example of how coercive control might happen in everyday life?

Coercive control can play out in many different ways but this is one (fictional) example using the names Dan, the perpetrator; Sarah, the victim-survivor; and Amy, her friend.

Dan is trying to isolate Sarah from her friends so he can control her more without her friends knowing about it or offering her support.

Whenever Sarah tries to go out to see her best friend Amy, Dan does something to make it difficult. He says that Sarah spends too much time with Amy and should be more committed to her relationship with him instead.

Dan makes Sarah feel guilty and wrong for causing him to doubt her commitment to him. Sarah worries and feels upset that she's being a bad girlfriend.

Sometimes, when Sarah is planning to go out to see Amy, Dan fakes having a personal crisis. Sarah feels she has to stay at home to help him with his problems.

Over time, Sarah encounters so many difficulties in seeing Amy that she greatly cuts back on the number of times she sees her. It's just easier not to try to see Amy. Amy thinks that Sarah doesn't like her anymore. Through Dan's successful use of subtle coercive control, Sarah is more isolated.

Dan has made sure that he hasn't done anything that Sarah or anyone else would feel confident to call "abuse". Yet, this is abuse. And it will get worse until Sarah's life becomes suffocating, and keeping the peace with Dan shapes her every action.

What is the relationship between coercive control and violence?

Some coercive control perpetrators use violence against victims-survivors and some don't — but perpetrators who do use violence do so to support and enhance their coercive control. Some of the specific, strategic purposes behind their violence are as follows:

- To punish the victim-survivor for not complying with their daily expectations and demands.
- To keep the victim-survivor in a scared and terrorized state so they will be even more compliant in the future.
- In cases where the victim-survivor has begun to seek more freedom and autonomy, to scare victim-survivor back into compliance.
- In cases of post-separation violence, to punish them for attempting to break free and escape the relationship.

How can perpetrators exert high levels of coercive control over victims-survivors without the use of violence?

Some perpetrators find that, even without the use of violence, they can behave in ways that are frightening, threatening, intimidating and manipulative, and can therefore exert high levels of control on victims-survivors. So, for example, instead of hitting victim-survivor:

- They throw things around, scream in the victim's-survivor's face, and hit the walls.
- They drive very recklessly to show that they are dangerous and capable of unhinged behavior.
- They threaten to or actually hurt the victim's-survivor's loved ones, including their pets (this hurt may be psychological or physical).
- They may tell stories of times they were violent to other people in the past, or tell stories about how influential they are in their community and how they can get away with breaking the rules.
- Instead of sexually forcing themselves on the victim-survivor, they guilt trip, whine, sulk and/or threaten to cheat to coerce the victim-survivor into unwanted sexual activities.

Victims-survivors who are subjected to such tactics can experience high levels of fear, regular human rights violations, exploitation by the perpetrator, and damage to their lives.

In what ways can coercive control affect children?

If children have a coercively controlling parent or parental figure, they should be seen as direct victims of coercive control in their own right. Girls and boys are equally likely to experience coercive control in context where one parent or parent-figure is abusing the other.

Coercive control can harm children in the following ways. This applies to the time when the parents are still together and after they separate:

- The children are likely to be aware of the perpetrator's powerfulness and the victim-survivor's relative powerlessness within the family. They are likely to be aware of the atmosphere of tension, anxiety and/or fear in the home they share with the perpetrator. If violence is taking place, the children are likely to be aware of it, and this may sometimes be the case even if the victim-survivor thinks they aren't aware.
- The coercive control perpetrator's actions may affect the children's emotions, behaviors and relationships. Children may be more angry or aggressive, more quiet and withdrawn, or more "perfect", helpful, successful or people-pleasing. They may feel close to the victim-survivor parent, the perpetrating parent, or neither parent. Some children may not recognise the perpetrator's actions as abuse, may not fully understand who is responsible for the abuse (the perpetrator and/or may mistakenly blame themselves or their victim-survivor parent).
- Children are likely to be affected by the isolation, restrictions and poverty that perpetrator imposes on the victim-survivor, and this in turn is likely to affect their social-emotional development. Children may have limited opportunities to socialize and meet their friends, to keep up their attendance at hobbies, clubs or teams, and/or to socialize with both sides of their family.
- Children who have a coercively controlling parent are at elevated risk for experiencing child emotional/psychological abuse, child physical abuse, child sexual abuse, child neglect, and exposure to domestic violence. This elevated risk remains if the parents have separated. Children can still be abused while spending time with their perpetrating parent post-separation.
- Children who are experiencing a perpetrator's use of post-separation coercive control may be fearful, distressed, confused or angry, may feel powerless and may lose trust in institutions that should have protected them from harm.

Impacts on the children are the fault of the perpetrator, not the victim-survivor, because the perpetrator is the one with power and unconstrained choices in the situation.

What are some red flags in your partner's behavior that strongly indicate that you are a victim of coercive control?

Here are 10 red flags that indicate that your partner is a coercive controller:

1. At first, your partner seems to offer what you exactly are looking for, such as help to get out of a bad situation, stability, luxuries, excitement, adventure, love or commitment.
2. Either your partner seems perfect at the start and you are keen to get into a relationship with them, or, if you aren't keen at the start, your partner pursues you until you give in.
3. The relationship moves fast, with a “whirlwind romance”, an early declaration of love, early moving in together, early moving to a new town or city, fast engagement or wedding and/or getting pregnant fast.
4. Signs that your partner is an abuser may show up at times when your life has become more entangled with theirs — for instance once you've moved in together, you've married them, you've become more financially reliant on them, you've moved to a different part of the country/world and left your support networks behind, you're pregnant, you've recently given birth, or you've become sick and need help and support.
5. Your partner may also begin to behave abusively at moments when they are feeling less powerful — such as when they are experiencing a career downturn when you are enjoying a career upturn, especially if this means you could now be viewed as “more successful” than them.
6. Your partner behaves abusively in ways that are harmful but also quite subtle — this is deliberate as they want you (and others who you might seek help from) not to label it as “abuse” and to see it as accidental or excusable. If the abuse has gone

lot worse in more recent times, it might not be subtle anymore, but it probably was earlier on.

7. The abuse begins with controlling you in ways that could seem somewhat reasonable to some people, such as asking you to minimise how much you talk to male work colleagues, asking you to wear clothes that cover up more of your body or asking you to spend more time with your partner and less time with other people — but this is the tip of the iceberg, as it gets worse from there.
8. Your partner may present the abuse as caring about you, looking after you, being committed to you, wanting to protect you, wanting to guide or lead you, or doing what is religiously or culturally appropriate. However what they are doing has harmful impacts on you.
9. One way or another, you now have less of your own money – maybe because your partner takes your money or persuades you to give up your employment and they give you a lesser allowance, or they expect you to pay for more than your fair share of joint expenses – and you cannot question the financial situation without them having a negative reaction.
10. Abusive behaviors are usually blamed on you, as your partner often makes you feel like you are the unreasonable, illogical, unkind, overly harsh or controlling one.

If you are a victim of coercive control, what might be the signs of this in your own behavior, feelings and experiences?

Feeling or acting in the following 9 ways is a sign that you are experiencing coercive control. This is written for adult victims-survivors, but some of this would apply to children who are victims-survivors too:

1. You feel like you are walking on eggshells, trying to keep the peace.
2. Things get really bad when your partner is upset or angry with you, so you change your behavior to try to avoid that happening.

3. You feel like your partner is dismissive of how you experienced certain events and is dismissive of your point of view. You stop sharing your opinions and views as much as you used to.
4. You second guess and doubt yourself a lot, you wonder if you are overreacting. You sometimes see yourself as bad and inadequate.
5. Your partner is (or used to be) nice to you a lot of the time, and you have happy memories of better times, but there are concerning, upsetting things happening in the relationship as well.
6. You see a different, more negative side to your partner that they don't show around other people.
7. Your partner has a lot of rules that you have to follow, but it would be impossible for you to impose the same amount of rules on them because of how they would react if you tried (and you'd never want to impose so many rules on another person anyway).
8. Your partner's promises to change don't turn into real change that is deep, fundamental or long-lasting.
9. Post-separation, your partner doesn't respect your right to end the relationship but instead hounds you and continues to dominate your life through tactics such as bombarding you with contact, manipulating your loved ones, and financially draining you.

What are the signs of post-separation coercive control?

Here are 11 signs that your post-separation experiences with a former partner aren't just difficult or "high conflict", but are actually abuse and coercive control:

1. Your former partner was coercively controlling toward you while you were in a relationship with them.

2. During the separation, your partner didn't think or behave as though your ending the relationship with them was a reasonable thing for you to do. They reacted as though you had no right to leave them and as though you have no right to live a life that doesn't have them in it.
3. Post-separation, your former partner keeps track of you and makes persistent unwanted contact with you, or gets other people to do so for them.
4. Your former partner makes it difficult or impossible for you to get what you are financially and legally entitled to. If you share children, your former partner puts their desire to make things difficult for you above the need to provide financial support for the children, e.g. by paying child support.
5. Your former partner untruthfully smears your character. They deny that they ever did anything abusive (or play down their abuse as though it was far less severe than it was); they tell people things that make them doubt your character such as telling them that you are crazy, mentally ill or bitter; and they make themselves seem like the victim in the situation. These tactics are known as DARVO: Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender.
6. If you share children, times when your former partner spends time with the children alone make you fear for the children's emotional or physical safety.
7. If you share children, your former partner uses the family court to continue to control and punish you. Their actions put you in a situation where you feel you have no choice but to spend time and money trying to get a family court order that keeps the children safe.
8. If you share children, your former partner uses times when you have to communicate with them about the children to intimidate you. When these times happen, it fills you with dread.
9. If you share children, your former partner regularly uses contact arrangements that cause chaos and disruption in your life, such as by regularly not turning up to

collect children at the agreed upon times in ways that impact your ability to hold down a job.

10. If you share children, your former partner blocks your ability to get suitable health care for your children, and undermines the children's health.
11. Even though you have always done your best to be a child-centred parent and even though you care deeply about your children's wishes and feelings as they themselves articulate them, your former partner attempts to sabotage your relationships with your children. They try to influence the children to make them think badly of your character and actions and encourage the children to treat you with anger or disdain when this is not justified by your own history of behavior or your current behavior.

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I am concerned that someone I know might be a victim-survivor of coercive control. What warning signs should I be looking out for?

Here are 8 warning signs to look out for if you are worried about another person, such as a community member, neighbor, colleague, friend or family member. This is primarily written for situations involving teenagers or adults being abused by partners but some of this would also apply if you are concerned that a parent or parent-figure is abusing their child.

1. The person you are concerned about seems overly concerned about not offending or upsetting or angering their partner.
2. The person you are concerned about apologizes frequently, seems to have feelings of being unworthy or not deserving things, struggles to ask for things they have

every right to ask for, and takes responsibility for things that aren't their responsibility.

3. The person you are concerned about sees you, speaks to you or contacts you less often than they used to. They seem to be more isolated than they used to be.
4. The person you are concerned about has changed their appearance or personality — they don't look or behave like they used to, and these changes appear to be for the worse, such as lower confidence or higher levels of distress.
5. The person you are concerned about has a partner who is “omnipresent” — they are always around, they are in near-constant contact, they show up unexpectedly or the person you are concerned about seems to have to regularly “check-in” with the partner when the partner is not physically present.
6. The person you are concerned about has a partner who has “jokingly” humiliated them in public by calling them humiliating names, insulting their intelligence or capabilities, or telling jokes at their expense.
7. For the person you are concerned about, ending the relationship seems to be really hard (possibly they have left and returned to the relationship once or several times in the past) — there are many barriers to them leaving and they can't seem to break free.
8. In cases where post-separation abuse is the concern, the person you are concerned about has an ex-partner who won't leave them alone. They track them, harass them, manipulate or guilt-trip them, drag out the divorce or keep taking them to family court without a good reason. The person you are concerned about has a life that seems to be shaped around trying to stay safe or keep their children safe from their ex-partner.

Final messages

- Abuse is never the victim's-survivor's fault. Responsibility lies with the abuser.

- Victims-survivors are ordinary, normal people who had the misfortune to encounter an abuser. There is zero shame in being a victim-survivor.
- No one should be abused in their relationship. Relationships should be about mutual respect and making both people's lives better and happier.

The expert: Who is Dr Emma Katz?

Dr Emma Katz is an academic and author who specializes in how coercive control affects children, young people and women.

She is internationally recognized as an expert in coercive control and domestic violence, having specialized in this area for more than 15 years.

While working as a Criminologist at Edge Hill University in England, Dr Katz wrote the best-selling *Substack* and gives keynotes, talks and training on coercive control to audiences around the world.

She holds a Ph.D. in Social Policy from a World Top 100 university, the University of Nottingham, and is the author of the book *Coercive Control in Children's and Mothers' Lives*, published by Oxford University Press.

Goodbye for now

Thank you for your continued support for [Decoding Coercive Control with Dr Emma Katz](#). I look forward to writing my next post on this site very soon.

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Dr Emma Katz is widely regarded as one the world’s foremost academic experts in her area of resear — how coercive control impacts on children and young people.

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Anya Harris  Anya Harris 20 Sept

 Liked by Dr Emma Katz

Thank you for this! All those components and we know you're scratching the surface but what brilliantly laid out issues while also covering the impact on our kids and how it continues post-separation. Your warning at the beginning underlines your deep level of understanding and you are saving lives with such education. I always want to say Brava at the end of your posts so Brava Again!

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1 reply by Dr Emma Katz



biz  20 Sept

 Liked by Dr Emma Katz

This is so helpful; I rarely see discussions and examples of coercive control in mainstream spaces consequence, so many people think domestic violence = physical violence and therefore if there or no physical violence, then it must not be domestic violence.

I especially appreciated the example of a woman trying to maintain friendships and her partner a "[doing] something to make it difficult". Like the wicked stepmother who didn't directly forbid Cinderella from attending the ball, but put every obstacle in her path. Imagine that repeated for anything Cinderella wanted to pursue.

I'm sharing this with family members who have experienced coercive control but I fear are unable to call it what it is. Hopefully some of the examples will ring true and they'll be able to put a name to it now.

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1 reply by Dr Emma Katz

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