

Defining Emotional Abuse and Coercive Control

Emotional abuse is a repeated pattern of behaviours that undermines another person's emotional wellbeing, sense of self, and psychological safety through disrespect, manipulation, intimidation, or invalidation. Over time, it erodes confidence, self-worth, and trust in one's own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. While it may occur independently, it also forms a central component of coercive control, where these behaviours become part of a broader pattern of domination and exploitation.

Coercive control is a deliberate, ongoing pattern of behaviour designed to control, dominate, exploit and foster dependence. It establishes an unequal power dynamic within the relationship by undermining a partner's autonomy, freedom, and sense of self while denying responsibility and suppressing attempts to resist.

KEY DIFFERENCES AT A GLANCE

EMOTIONAL ABUSE	COERCIVE CONTROL	THE BOTTOM LINE
 Can occur on its own.	 Always a deliberate strategy.	All coercive control includes emotional abuse.
 Often about one person protecting their comfort, avoiding accountability, maintaining status quo.	 Aims to control, dominate, exploit and foster dependence.	
 Erodes confidence, self-worth and trust over time.	 Systematically undermines autonomy, freedom and sense of self.	Not all emotional abuse is coercive control.
 Harmful and serious, but not automatically part of a broader strategy of domination.	 Denies responsibility and suppresses attempts to resist.	

Related But Not the Same

It's easy to assume that emotional abuse and coercive control are interchangeable or just different names for the same thing. They're not, however, and it is important to be able to formulate the difference.

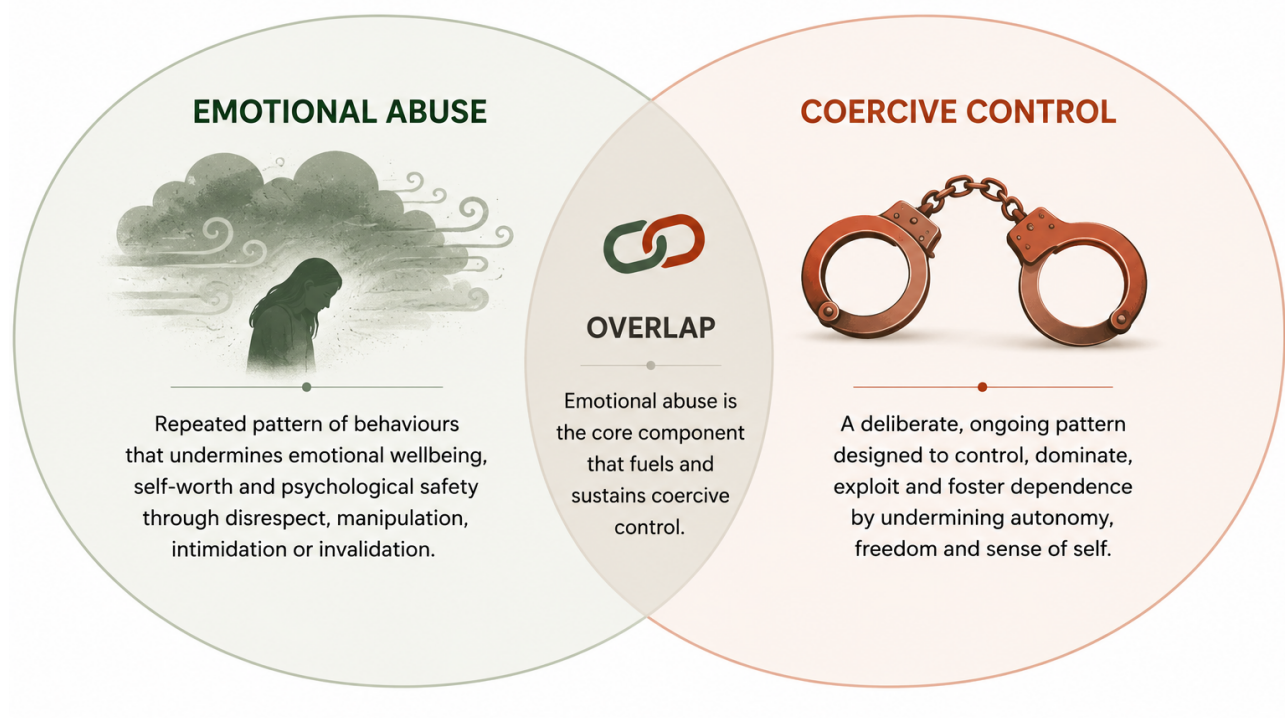
Emotional abuse is a pattern of behaviours that can absolutely stand on its own. A person can be consistently disrespected, invalidated, or made to feel small in a relationship without that relationship amounting to a broader campaign of domination. Sometimes emotional abuse occurs not as a deliberate strategy to strip someone of their autonomy, but more about one partner protecting their own comfort,

avoiding accountability, and maintaining a convenient relationship status quo that suits them. It's still genuinely harmful and deserves our full attention. But it isn't automatically coercive control.

Coercive control is something bigger. It's not one behaviour or even one type of abuse but a whole regime, built from multiple, self-reinforcing forms of control, all working together toward the same end: to dominate, exploit, and remove autonomy. And emotional abuse is always somewhere inside that regime as the core mechanism the whole system runs on.

Here is a simple way to hold onto the distinction: Emotional abuse is the mechanism and coercive control is the regime it serves. One can exist without the other since emotional abuse doesn't need coercive control to be real. But coercive control cannot exist without emotional abuse. It's always there, doing the work, even when it's sitting alongside financial control, isolation, surveillance, physical abuse or threats.

— RELATED BUT NOT THE SAME —



Emotional Abuse Is the Most Common Type of Abuse, not Physical Violence

Physical violence is not what defines domestic abuse or coercive control. It's serious, and it can leave lasting physical damage, but it's not the primary strategy abuse relies on. Research consistently shows that psychological and emotional abuse are present in almost every case of relational abuse, while physical violence shows up in just under half.