

Defining Emotional Abuse and Coercive Control

Emotional abuse is a repeated pattern of behaviours that devalues, dismisses or manipulates another person's feelings, needs, perspectives and sense of self. It is characterised by persistent disrespect, invalidation, blame-shifting, manipulation and lack of accountability that gradually erodes a person's sense of self-worth, emotional security, and trust in their own perceptions.

Coercive control is an ongoing pattern of multiple interconnected abusive behaviours that aims to dominate, exploit and increasingly restrict another person's autonomy, establishing an unequal power dynamic and dependence. It works through devaluation, manipulation, isolation, exploitation, restriction of autonomy, intimidation and denial of accountability while suppressing any attempts to resist. Over time, coercive control progressively erodes confidence, freedom, the person's sense of self and trust in one's own thoughts, feelings and experiences.

KEY DIFFERENCES AT A GLANCE

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

- ✓ Can occur on its own.
- ✓ Often about one person protecting their comfort, avoiding accountability, maintaining status quo.
- ✓ Erodes confidence, self-worth and trust over time.
- ✓ Harmful and serious, but not automatically part of a broader strategy of domination.

COERCIVE CONTROL

- ✓ Always a deliberate strategy.
- ✓ Aims to control, dominate, exploit and foster dependence.
- ✓ Systematically undermines autonomy, freedom and sense of self.
- ✓ Denies responsibility and suppresses attempts to resist.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- ✓ All coercive control includes emotional abuse.
- ✓ Not all emotional abuse is coercive control.



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.

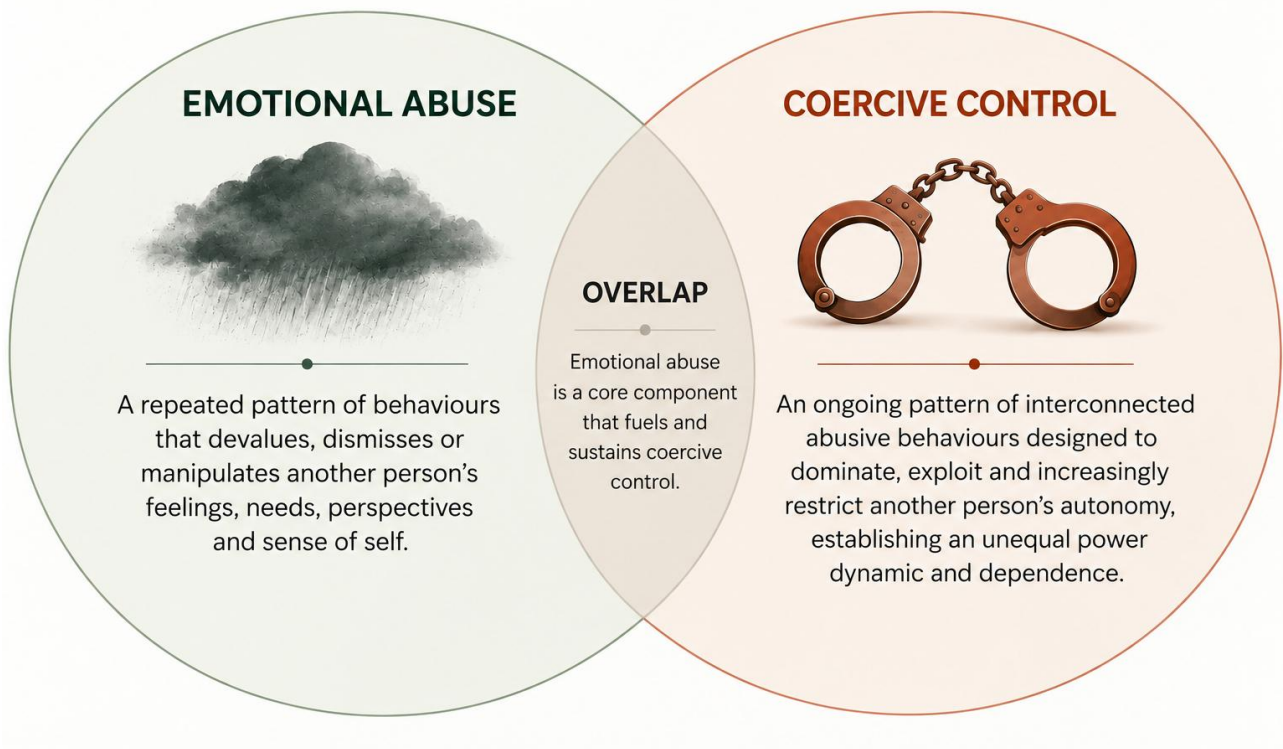
Emotional abuse is a pattern of behaviours that can absolutely operate on its own. A person can be consistently disrespected, invalidated, or made to feel small in a relationship without that relationship amounting to a broader pattern of domination. Emotional abuse may occur not as a deliberate strategy to strip someone of their autonomy, but as a way for one partner to protect their own comfort within the

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

Coercive control is something bigger. It is not one behaviour, or even one type of abuse, but a whole regime built from multiple, self-reinforcing forms of abuse that work together toward the same goal: to dominate, exploit, and progressively remove autonomy and resistance. Emotional abuse is always part of that regime and a core mechanism through which the system operates.

So here's a simple way to hold onto the distinction: Emotional abuse is a mechanism, and coercive control is the regime it serves. Emotional abuse can exist without coercive control being the defining dynamic of the relationship, but coercive control cannot function without emotional abuse. It is always there, operating 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.