



Controlling Behaviour in Relationships

A guide for older women

women's aid

invisible prison

breaking free together



Domestic abuse includes a range of different type of behaviours, and does not relate only to physical abuse. Emotional, sexual and financial abuse are all forms of abusive behaviour in a relationship. Recently, there has been a change in the law regarding non-physical abuse, and there is a new criminal offence called 'coercive control'. This makes it illegal for someone to use coercive or controlling behaviour against their partner or family member.

The coercive control law came into force in December 2015 and is applicable to anyone experiencing coercive and controlling behaviour in their relationship, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity or sexuality. However, women and girls are much more likely to be victims of domestic abuse than men or boys. We have produced this guide specifically for older women to explain what coercive control is, how the new law works and where you can get support for all forms of domestic abuse. You may have been experiencing domestic abuse and coercive control for a long time - years or decades - or perhaps only for a short while.

You may not have recognised that what you've been experiencing is coercive control before. You may have felt that domestic abuse support services weren't for you because of your age. No matter what your experience is, Women's Aid and our network of local services are here for you, at any time in your life.



What is coercive control?

“Coercive or controlling behaviour does not relate to a single incident. It is often a purposeful pattern of incidents which takes place over time in order for one individual to exert power, control or coercion over another.”

[Home Office Statutory Guidance, 2015]

“An older person may be the victim of elder abuse, this may include: financial, emotional, psychological, sexual physical or neglect. This can affect both men and women. The people carrying out the abuse are often in a position of trust such as a family relationship.”

(Home Office Statutory Guidance, 2015)

Coercive and controlling behaviour is a pattern of repeated abusive behaviour carried out within an intimate relationship or within a family. This abuse may continue even after a relationship has formally ended (for example after a divorce, or the end of an intimate relationship).

The perpetrator could be someone you have known for a long time. It could be someone you trusted to care for you, support you or look out for your best interests. The perpetrator could be:

- an intimate partner or ex-partner (for example, a spouse, civil partner, or boyfriend/girlfriend)
- a family member (for example, your son or daughter, grandchild, a sibling, a cousin) or
- a personal assistant or carer.

In many relationships, there are occasions where one person will make a decision on behalf of their partner, or where one person will take control of a certain situation. Within the context of a respectful, supportive and healthy relationship this is not an issue. However, it is abuse when your freedom is taken away from you and your day-to-day life is controlled.

Am I experiencing coercive control?

Coercive and controlling behaviour can take many forms and is always unacceptable. Abuse can happen anywhere; this includes in your private home or in public places. The sort of things to look out for if you think you are (or someone you know is) experiencing coercive control include:

- being belittled, humiliated and told you are worthless or that you are unable to make decisions for yourself
- not having your name against the mortgage on the family home, or any access to joint accounts or savings
- being stopped from working (either paid employment or voluntary work)
- having your money taken away or controlled (this could be your savings, your wages, your pension, your benefit payments)
- your partner restricting your access to money by exploiting the fact he has been the main breadwinner in the family while you took on unpaid caring responsibilities
- being told which hobbies you can or cannot have
- being told you can't have contact or only a little contact with your friends and family
- being told how to spend your time and who you can spend it with
- your partner or relation making friends and family members feel uncomfortable or unwelcome when they visit, so they stop visiting
- having your use of a telephone controlled and your letters opened against your wishes
- being told you can't see your grandchildren or being threatened with this
- having your access to food, drinks and day-to-day products restricted
- having your activities monitored or controlled
- being told what you should wear
- being threatened with violence if you do not behave in a certain way
- having threats made against your loved ones or pets
- having threats made to damage your personal property
- having your health problems or impairments exploited as a means of controlling you.

All of these types of behaviour, and combinations of lots of these behaviours, are very common in abusive relationships. They can be part of a pattern of abuse that also includes physical violence and sexual violence.

Coercive control can start off slowly and build up over time. It can often take a really long time to realise that the behaviour you have been living with day-to-day is in fact a form of domestic abuse. Lots of women who have been living with this type of behaviour for many years often recognise that they are not very happy in their relationship and they have to live by certain 'rules', but they may not identify this as coercive control.

The abuse you are experiencing or have experienced is unacceptable.

How does experiencing coercive control make you feel?

If you have experienced or are experiencing coercive control, it is likely to have a huge effect on your feelings, emotions and health. You may feel anxious or depressed, or have very low self-esteem.

Coercive control creates a context of fear, which can make you feel like you 'are walking on eggshells' all the time, and 'second guessing' what is going to provoke an angry outburst. It can make you nervous, affect your confidence, and make you feel that you are not free to make your own decisions.

You may feel financially insecure and scared that you do not have access to money; your partner may be using money to control you. Coercive control can be very isolating as abusers will often keep the victim away from friends and family to make sure you have few or no close relationships. This can make you feel very alone, and that there is nobody to turn to. There can be physical effects too: you may feel generally unwell, nauseous, experience headaches or having other on-going physical health symptoms.

If any of this sounds like you and you are experiencing coercive control, it is not your fault and you are not alone. Many women of all ages experience domestic abuse.

Women's Aid is here to support women like you.



One woman's story...

Irene* was 78 when she contacted Women's Aid. Her husband, Dennis* had recently died and had been abusive towards her since they got married, when Irene was 18. Irene told her mother shortly after getting married that he was violent and threatening towards her. Her mother told her that marriage was for life, and she had to put up with it, as many marriages were difficult. The abuse became worse when she became pregnant with their son, and Irene felt that there was no way out (this was before Women's Aid existed). The longer Irene experienced abuse for, the more alone she felt. Her self-esteem was low and she didn't try to tell anyone again, as she felt ashamed and did not think she would be believed, even though her son knew that Dennis was emotionally abusive towards her. Even when Dennis was diagnosed with terminal cancer and became weak, he would tell her that she was worthless and couldn't cope without him, and would physically hurt her when she tried to help him. After his funeral, Irene called us because she needed to talk to someone who would understand – she felt finally free. She had lived with nearly 60 years of abuse in her marriage.

It does not matter how long you have been with your partner, it is never too late to seek support from Women's Aid. We will listen and we will believe you.



How can I prove I have experienced coercive control?

The types of evidence that can be used by the police in a coercive control case are:

- copies of emails or letters
- details of previous threats
- phone records
- records of your calls to the National Domestic Violence Helpline (call the helpline to ask for access to these, 0808 2000 247)
- audio recordings of 999 calls
- records of interaction with services such as support services
- medical records
- text messages
- CCTV (surveillance video cameras) and body worn video footage from when the police attend a domestic abuse situation
- witness testimony from family, friends or neighbours
- bank records
- evidence of isolation such as lack of contact with family, friends, or other agencies they were previously in contact with.

What is the punishment for an offender?

The most serious perpetrators of coercive control can be sentenced to five years in prison. In other cases, it is more likely that there will be a shorter prison sentence or a fine.

The perpetrator will only be prosecuted for this crime if there is some evidence that it has happened on at least two occasions. There must also be evidence that the victim has feared that violence will be used against them, or that they have suffered serious alarm or distress which has affected their daily life.

If you or a friend need help...

[Women's Aid is here for you, at any time in your life.](#)

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#AnyWoman

Where can I go for help?

If you, or someone you know, are in immediate danger then call the police on 999.

Call the National Domestic Violence Helpline (run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge) on **0808 2000 247** (open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week).

Access support from other women experiencing abuse on the Survivors' Forum

Use the Women's Aid website to find your local specialist domestic abuse service where you can access counselling, legal help, refuge and other support: www.womensaid.org.uk

Tell your doctor (GP) or nurse what you are experiencing and ask to be confidentially referred to a specialist support service.

women's aid
until women & children are safe