

COERCIVE CONTROL

Advocacy Handbook



Marriage and
Family Ministry
Catholic Diocese
of Cleveland



Office for
Human Life
Catholic Diocese
of Cleveland



HOPE & HEALING

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Introduction

In homes, relationships, and even within our faith communities, people are suffering in silence. Sometimes there are visible bruises or shouted threats. More often, the harm begins with something quieter, more insidious: **coercive control**.



This pattern of behavior can escalate over time, evolving into physical violence and, in too many tragic cases, ending in severe injury or death. Coercive control is one of the most common and overlooked forms of abuse, and it often lays the foundation for more overt acts of domestic violence.

It's the kind of harm that takes away a person's freedom, peace, and dignity, sometimes without a single physical blow. It is real, it is damaging, and it is not what God wants for anyone.

This booklet was created to educate, raise awareness, and most of all, to offer hope. Whether you are personally experiencing abuse, know someone who might be, or serve in ministry where someone may confide in you, this handbook is for you.

As a Catholic community, we are called to protect the vulnerable, speak truth in love, and accompany one another with compassion and courage. The Church upholds the dignity of every human person and affirms that no one is called to endure abuse — physical, emotional, spiritual, or otherwise — as a form of Christian sacrifice.

In these pages, you'll find:

- Clarity about what the Church teaches about marriage, separation, and human dignity
- Definitions and signs of coercive control and domestic violence
- Encouragement and guidance for those in harm's way
- Tools and direction for those who want to help
- What safety and support can look like
- A deep and unwavering reminder that you are not alone

We hope these pages offer a light in the darkness and a small, steady witness to truth, justice, and the healing love of God.



“Let us work together as men and women of faith for a truly non-violent society that respects the equality, integrity, and dignity of all persons.”

—Diocese of Cleveland, “Breaking the Silence: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence” (2000)

What the Church Teaches

The Catholic Church clearly and consistently opposes all forms of domestic violence. Abuse — whether physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual, or verbal — violates the dignity of the human person and has no place in Christian life. The Church calls us to protect the vulnerable, reject all forms of domination and control, and accompany those who are suffering with compassion and courage.

Pope Francis affirms this in *Amoris Laetitia*, emphasizing that “good pastoral training [for lay leaders] is important especially in light of particular emergency situations arising from cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse” (AL 204). He reminds us that violence in the home is not only a personal tragedy...it is a concern for the whole Church.

In some situations, separation may be “morally necessary” for safety (AL 241). The Church calls us to respond with justice, mercy, and clarity, always upholding the dignity and safety of the person who is being harmed.





The following quotes reflect this teaching and the Church's commitment to standing with those in need.

“A spouse who occasions grave danger of soul or body to the other or to the children, or otherwise makes the common life unduly difficult, provides the other spouse with a lawful reason to leave, either by a decree of the local ordinary or, if there is danger in delay, even on his or her own authority.”

-Canon Law 1153 §1

“Domestic violence is often shrouded in silence. People outside the family hesitate to interfere, even when they suspect abuse is occurring... Some people still argue—mistakenly—that intervention by outside sources endangers the sanctity of the home. Yet abuse and assault are no less serious when they occur within a family.”

-USCCB, “When I Call For Help” (1992)

Violence is never a proper response. With the conviction of her faith in Christ and with the awareness of her mission, the Church proclaims “that violence is evil, that violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems, that violence is unworthy of man. Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity. Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings.”

-Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 496

The Church has always taught that defending human dignity is central to the Gospel. For more information on the Church's call for Advocacy, see page 17.

Are You Experiencing Coercive Control?

If any part of your relationship feels unsafe, controlling, or leaves you feeling small, afraid, or confused, please know that is not love, and it is not what God desires for you.



You may be facing coercive control if your partner:

- Monitors your phone, finances, or movements
- Isolates you from friends, family, or your faith
- Uses fear, guilt, or religion to manipulate you
- Makes you doubt your memory, reality, or worth
- Controls decisions, resources, or how you express yourself

You do not need bruises
to be in an abusive relationship.

You do not need permission
to reach out for help.

You are allowed
to want peace, freedom, and safety.

There are safe, confidential ways to seek support. You are not alone, and you are not overreacting. You are worthy of love that honors your dignity.

Are You Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence?

If your relationship feels controlling or has ever included threats, physical violence, or sexual abuse, please know that you are not alone and that there is help. It's important to understand that abusive relationships often escalate over time.

Your life, or your children's lives, may be at risk if:

- There are weapons in the home
- Your partner has ever tried to choke or strangle you
- The violence has increased in frequency or intensity

These are serious warning signs. You don't have to handle this on your own. *There are professionals who can help you navigate this safely.*

You Deserve to Be Safe and Supported

- If you are already in couple's counseling and feel unheard or uncomfortable, trust that instinct. Abuse cannot be worked out together in a joint session.
- Individual counseling with a personal counselor can help you speak freely and honestly.
- If you're not ready to speak with someone at your parish, the Diocesan Office of Marriage and Family Ministry is also available to help.
- Creating a safety plan is an important next step. It can help you think clearly about what to do, who to call, and where to go if things get worse.

What is a Safety Plan?



A safety plan is a simple, personalized guide to help you stay safe and prepared in a dangerous situation. It covers things like where to go, who to call, and what to bring. Scan the QR code or visit **thehotline.org/plan-for-safety** for more information and tools to create your own.



Abuse is not just some spiritual trial you are meant to carry alone. It's not about anger management, but about power and control.

If your partner truly wants to change, they need to seek help for themselves...not expect you to stay and suffer. There are resources that can help interrupt the cycle of abuse. If they're willing, they can contact ***A Call for Change Helpline*** —anonymous, confidential, and free.

Call: **877-898-3411**

Email: **help@acallforchangehelpline.org**

Website: **www.acallforchangehelpline.org**



There are also local and virtual support groups for those who use abusive behaviors, and that support can extend to your family too.



You Are Not Alone

If you recognize your own experience in these pages, maybe for the first time, please know that *you are not alone.*

You may feel trapped, confused, ashamed, or even guilty. You may wonder if what you're going through is really "that bad." Maybe you've been told that no one will believe you, that it's your fault, or that you are overreacting. Maybe you've tried to reach out before and were met with silence, judgment, or rejection.

What is happening to you is not your fault; your suffering matters, and there is help.

Coercive control thrives in silence and isolation, but healing begins the moment you are seen and believed. God does not ask you to stay in fear, pain, or confusion. He shows us this truth through the passion of His Son, Jesus, who came to bring freedom to the oppressed, healing to the brokenhearted, and hope to the weary.

You are not being weak for feeling hurt. You are not being disloyal for wanting safety. You are not a bad spouse, parent, or Catholic for needing help. You are a beloved child of God, worthy of peace, safety, and respect.

You do not have to walk this road alone, and you are in control of who helps you, and how they help. There are people ready to accompany you in your parish, in your community, and through the resources in this booklet. Please remember that you are deeply, unshakably loved.

Healing and Support

Healing after coercive control or abuse takes time. It is not a straight line, and you do not have to walk through it alone. Whether you've just recognized the abuse or have already left the situation, healing is possible.

God desires your restoration, not just your survival.

Healing is sacred work.

You may grieve what was lost: time, peace, family, or dreams. That grief is real, and God meets you there. In Scripture, we see Jesus restore the brokenhearted, stand with the vulnerable, and bring hope where others see only shame.





Healing is not about forgetting. It's about reclaiming your life and worth. The journey looks different for everyone, and it is important to remember that recovery is not linear nor a checklist. You are not broken beyond repair—you are deeply loved and made for peace.

Healing Involves:

- **Practical help** - This may include legal aid, housing support, financial planning, or job assistance. Rebuilding your life often involves small, brave steps.
- **Safe community** - Surround yourself with people who believe you, support your healing, and speak life, not guilt, into your journey.
- **Spiritual care** - A trusted priest, spiritual director, or pastoral counselor can accompany you with prayer, sacraments, and compassionate guidance.
- **Emotional support** - Counseling or therapy can help you rebuild your identity and process trauma in a safe space. Look for professionals who understand abuse and respect your faith.

Understanding Coercive Control

When most people think of abuse, they often imagine physical violence: bruises, threats, or shouting. But abuse can take many forms. One of the most harmful and least understood is coercive control: a pattern of behavior that strips someone of their freedom, safety, and sense of self.

Coercive control is about power and domination. It's not always loud or visible, and it can happen slowly or over time through fear, manipulation, shame, and isolation. It leaves no obvious scars, but it deeply wounds the heart, mind, and spirit.

Examples of coercive control include:

- Constant criticism or humiliation
- Monitoring your phone, spending, or movements
- Isolating you from family, friends, or faith community
- Controlling access to money, transportation, or healthcare
- Using Scripture or religious guilt to justify abuse
- Threatening to harm you, your children, or themselves if you speak up
- Gaslighting (making you question your memory, reality, or sanity)

In a healthy relationship, love is freely given and received. In a coercive one, love is twisted into a tool for control. Because it often doesn't involve physical harm, it can be difficult to name or even recognize what's happening.

Make no mistake: ***Coercive control is abuse.***

It is a violation of your dignity and freedom, and it is never God's will for your life. Understanding coercive control is the first step toward healing.

Understanding Domestic Violence

Every year, an estimated 10 million people in the U.S. experience domestic violence.* In Ohio alone, over 188,000 individuals are affected by intimate partner violence each year.** Nearly 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men in the U.S. will face abuse from a partner in their lifetime.***



For a clearer view of the full Power and Control Wheel, scan the QR code or visit thehotline.org to explore the complete diagram.

* Huecker MR, King KC, Jordan GA, et al. Domestic Violence. StatPearls Publishing; updated April 2023.

** Ohio Domestic Violence Network. The Economic Impact of Domestic Violence in Ohio: 2025 Report.

*** Huecker MR, King KC, Jordan GA, et al. Domestic Violence. StatPearls Publishing; updated April 2023.

The Batterer's Mindset

To truly respond to coercive control effectively, we must also understand the mindset of those who use it. Abuse is not just about anger or losing control — it is often about *exerting* control, deliberately and repeatedly.

Not every person who uses abusive tactics looks or behaves the same, but many share certain patterns of thought and behavior.

Common Beliefs or Motivations:

- **Entitlement:** Believing they have the right to control their partner emotionally, financially, or spiritually.
- **Distorted love:** Equating love with possession, obedience, or control.
- **Learned behavior:** Having grown up in homes where abuse was normalized.
- **Insecurity or fear of abandonment:** Masked by domination or manipulation.
- **Minimization or denial:** Refusing to see their behavior as abusive.
- **Spiritual misuse:** Twisting Scripture or Church teachings to justify harmful control.



Even when abuse is not physical, it often follows a pattern of blame, manipulation, and isolation. The abuser may apologize, promise to change, or act lovingly in between incidents, which can confuse and keep the victim hopeful. This cycle is powerful, and deeply damaging.

Important Truths:

- Abuse is a choice. While stress, alcohol, or conflict may influence behavior, they do not excuse it. *Accountability remains with the one who chooses to harm.*
- Toxic or abusive behavior doesn't always look obvious. It often comes from someone who is kind or loving some days, but deeply hurtful on others, leaving victims walking on eggshells and never sure which version of them they'll face.
- *Unpredictability is not love; it's a form of control.* Abusers are often charming or kind in public, but cruel in private.

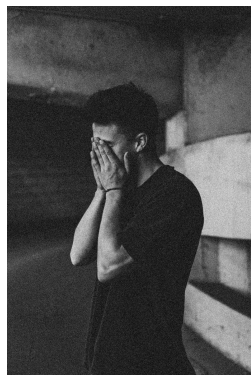
This knowledge is not about excusing abusive behavior — it's about naming it, rejecting shame, and helping survivors recognize that the abuse is not their fault.



Why People Stay

It's a question often asked, sometimes in judgment and sometimes in confusion: "If it's so bad, why don't they just leave?"

The truth is, leaving an abusive or controlling relationship isn't simple. People stay for many reasons, and none of them mean they deserve what's happening to them.



Here are just a few reasons why someone might stay:

- Fear — of retaliation, of losing custody, of being alone
- Shame — believing it's their fault or they've failed
- Hope — thinking things will get better or the abuser will change
- Finances — dependence or fear of homelessness
- Children — wanting to protect them or keep the family together
- Faith — misunderstanding Church teaching
- Pressure — from family, culture, or community

Abuse often includes psychological tactics like gaslighting, isolation, and spiritual manipulation, which make it hard for someone to trust their own instincts or feel worthy of help. As Catholics, we must meet these individuals not with blame, but with mercy. Jesus never shamed the suffering — He stood with them.

If you are someone who has stayed longer than you wanted to, please know: You are not weak. You are surviving, and it is never too late to choose safety.

A Call to Defend and Advocate for Dignity

A Closer Look into Church Teaching

Coercive Control is a Violation of Human Dignity

The Church has always taught that defending human dignity is central to the Gospel. As the Synod of Bishops declared: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world...are a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.” (*Justice in the World*, no. 6)

Pope St. John Paul II likewise insisted that “human dignity is a Gospel value that cannot be despised without greatly offending the Creator.” (*CELAM*, nos. 202–203)

Wherever dignity is threatened or ignored, Catholics are called to speak and act for the vulnerable.

Integrity and Conscience

Human dignity is closely tied to freedom of thought and action. The Church affirms that people must be able to decide and act “on grounds of duty and conscience, without external pressure or coercion.” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, cited in *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 31)

Any attempt to manipulate or dominate another person, whether physically, emotionally, sexually, psychologically, or spiritually, directly rejects that dignity. Such acts are classified by the Church as intrinsically evil: “Whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit...are infamies indeed. They poison human society...they are supreme dishonor to the Creator.” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 27; cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 80–81)

Though the term “coercive control” is new, the Church has long condemned these behaviors as grave moral wrongs.

Freedom is a Natural Right

Because every person is created in God's image (cf. Gen 1:27), all are entitled to basic rights: life, bodily integrity, good name, and true freedom. Pope St. John XXIII wrote: "True freedom...is stronger than any violence or injustice. Such is the freedom which the Church holds most dear." (*Pacem in Terris*, nos. 11–14)

Rights come with duties. As explained in *Pacem in Terris*: "One man's natural right gives rise to a corresponding duty in other men: the duty of recognizing and respecting that right...To claim one's rights and ignore one's duties is like building a house with one hand and tearing it down with the other." (nos. 28–31)



Our Catholic Responsibility

Every person has the right to live free from control, intimidation, and abuse. Safeguarding that right is not optional; it flows directly from our belief in the innate dignity of every human being. As Catholics, we are called to:

- Stand with those whose dignity is threatened.
- Speak against behaviors and systems that coerce or oppress.
- Support survivors and foster communities where respect, freedom, and love can flourish.

In short: to follow Christ is to defend the dignity and freedom of every person, especially those silenced by coercive control.

How to be an Advocate

Now that you've expanded your knowledge about the dynamics of power and control, you're ready to become an advocate.



You may sense that something isn't right with someone you care about: a friend, parishioner, coworker, or family member. Maybe they seem anxious, withdrawn, or isolated. Maybe their partner is overly controlling or critical.

Keep in mind that abuse doesn't always look how we expect. The person causing harm may appear charming, outgoing, or successful, or even admired by others. That's part of what makes coercive control so hard to spot or believe from the outside.

What you say and do can make a real difference. Remain curious and provide space for conversation. Even if the person isn't ready to talk or leave, knowing someone sees them and cares can be a lifeline. When someone confides in you about abuse or coercive control, it may come suddenly: in the middle of a conversation, during confession, after Mass, or in your office. They may be hesitant, emotional, or unclear.

In that moment, how you respond matters deeply. You don't have to be an expert, but you do need to be present, calm, and safe.

Helping Someone Safely

- **Listen without judgment.** Your role is not to investigate: it's to accompany with compassion.
- **Stay calm.** Even if what they share is upsetting, your steadiness helps them feel safe.
- **Be gentle and affirming.** Use phrases like:
 - "I'm here if you ever want to talk."
 - "Thank you for trusting me."
 - "What you're sharing is serious, and I believe you."
- **Believe them.** Even if the details are hard to hear, your belief helps undo the lies they've been told.
- **Prioritize their safety.** If they are in immediate danger, help them contact emergency services or a crisis hotline.
- **Respect their privacy.** Never confront the abuser or share what they've told you unless someone is in immediate danger.
- **Support their timing.** Leaving can be dangerous and complicated — follow their pace, not your urgency.
- **Offer support, not solutions.** Help connect them with professional and pastoral resources, but don't try to fix everything yourself.
- **Know your limits.** You are not expected to have all the answers. Being a steady, safe presence is powerful on its own.

What Not To Do:

- Don't promise confidentiality you can't keep (especially if there's risk of harm to them or others).
- Don't suggest they pray it away or "be more forgiving."
- Don't dismiss emotional, verbal, or spiritual abuse just because there's no physical harm.
- Do not recommend couples counseling.

Reporting Abuse: What You Need To Know

Domestic Violence (Adults)

- **Emergency situations:** If you see violence or abuse happening right now, especially in a public place, call 911 immediately.
- **Non-emergencies:** If someone tells you they are in an abusive or unhealthy relationship but they are not in immediate danger, do not call for them. Support them, listen, and encourage them to report using the non-emergency police or sheriff's number for their county.
- **Safety planning:** If they are not ready to call, you can still help by encouraging them to create a safety plan or by connecting them with trusted local resources.
- **Information to provide:** When calling 911 or a non-emergency line, be ready to share clear details. This includes your location or the location where the abuse is happening, as well as physical descriptions of those involved. These details are often the first things dispatchers ask for.
- **Your role:** Accompany and support. The choice to report is theirs unless there is an immediate threat to life or safety.

Child Abuse or Neglect

- **Mandated reporting:** Under the Diocese of Cleveland's Policy for the Safety of Children in Matters of Sexual Abuse and Standards of Conduct for Ministry, all volunteers and staff are mandated reporters.
- **What to do:**
 - If you suspect child abuse or neglect, contact civil authorities.
 - If a child is in immediate danger or you are witnessing abuse, call 911 without delay.
 - After hours, many counties route child-protection calls through 911, which forwards the report to the appropriate agency.

When You Are Unsure

- If you are worried about an adult's safety or unsure how to respond, seek guidance from a supervisor, ministry leader, or trusted diocesan contact.
- When in doubt about a child's safety, report — it is always better to err on the side of protecting a child.

Resources for You

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| 01 | The Hotline | <p>The National Domestic Violence Hotline offers 24/7 confidential support, education, and resources for anyone experiencing abuse or seeking to help.</p> <p>Learn More: thehotline.org
Call: 800-799-7233 (SAFE)</p> |
| 02 | RAINN Website | <p>RAINN is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, offering 24/7 support through the National Sexual Assault Hotline, prevention resources, and survivor services.</p> <p>Learn More: rainn.org
Call: 800-656-4673 (HOPE)</p> |
| 03 | A Call for Change Helpline | <p>A free, anonymous, and confidential helpline supporting teens and adults working to prevent or stop abusive behavior in relationships. Callers are met with respect and support.</p> <p>Learn More: acallforchangehelpline.org
Call: 877-898-3411</p> |
| 04 | 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline | <p>A free, 24/7 confidential crisis line for anyone experiencing mental health challenges, emotional distress, substance use concerns, or who just needs someone to talk to.</p> <p>Learn More: 988lifeline.org
Call: 988</p> |
| 05 | Catholics for Family Peace | <p>Provides faith-based resources, education, and prayer tools to help the Catholic community prevent and respond to domestic abuse. Workshops available by request.</p> <p>Learn More: catholicsforfamilypeace.org</p> |

Resources *continued*

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| 06 | Journey Center
for Safety and
Healing | Offers comprehensive services, support, and shelters for those affected by domestic violence in Cuyahoga County.

Learn More: journeyneo.org/
Call: 216-391-4357 |
| 07 | Hope's Garden | A Christ-centered community offering spiritual support and healing for women impacted by betrayal, trauma, or abuse.

Learn More: hopesgarden.com |
| 08 | You Are
Made New | A Catholic ministry offering healing retreats, coaching, and spiritual support for those recovering from trauma, abuse, and betrayal — centered on Christ's restoring love.

Learn More: youaremadenew.com |
| 09 | Cuyahoga
County
Witness/Victim
Service Center | Provides support, court advocacy, and resources for victims of crime through the Witness Victim Service Center and the Family Justice Center.

Learn More: cuyahogacounty.gov/ |
| 10 | Catholic
Charities | Offers a wide range of services in Cuyahoga County, including behavioral health, family support, and advocacy serving people of all faiths with Christ's healing mission.

Learn More: ccdogle.org/
Call: 216-334-2900 |

Resources *continued*

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| 11 | Ohio Domestic Violence Network | <p>Provides statewide leadership, training, and resources to support domestic violence programs and promote safe, equitable communities free from violence.</p> <p>Learn More: odvn.org/</p> |
| 12 | Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence | <p>A statewide coalition supporting rape crisis centers, advocating for survivor-centered services, and working to prevent sexual violence across Ohio.</p> <p>Learn More: oaesv.org/</p> |
| 13 | A Call to Men | <p>Promotes healthy, respectful manhood and offers education, trainings, and resources to prevent violence and support gender equality in communities, schools, and organizations.</p> <p>Learn More: acalltomen.org/</p> |
| 14 | One-Eighty | <p>Provides 24/7 support and trauma-informed services for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, along with holistic care to promote healing and lasting change.</p> <p>Learn More: one-eighty.org
Call: 800-686-1122</p> |
| 15 | Lorain County Safe Harbor | <p>Provides family-centered services, support, shelters, and tools to help survivors of domestic violence in Lorain County heal, regain independence, and rebuild safely.</p> <p>Learn More: genesishouseshelter.org
Call: 440-244-1853 ext. 1</p> |



Final Words of Encouragement

A Message from The Director

My passion for this work comes from both professional experience and personal encounters. I've seen the pain abuse causes, and the healing that's possible when we respond with compassion and courage.

We can make a difference. We can bring hope to survivors, reduce shame, and even save lives. We can help shape a new generation's understanding of love and break harmful cycles.

It's a myth that abuse doesn't happen in the Church. But statistics don't lie; domestic violence occurs in our pews, and we need to be ready to recognize it and respond. Awareness must go beyond just training staff and volunteers — it needs to reach the whole parish community.

I've heard from women who found help after a priest spoke out, and from parents worried about their daughters and granddaughters. This is real, and lives are at stake.

My prayer is that this booklet helps you feel empowered to step in. As Eddy Marflak says so well: "We don't need you to be an expert. We need you to be an advocate."

If this resource has sparked your interest in learning more, please reach out. We can bring awareness sessions and professional training to your parish or deanery.

Together, let's build a culture of awareness, compassion, and courage — one that reflects the heart of Christ.

Teresa Yohman

Scan the QR code for
additional information
or resources:



Contact Us:

Teresa Yohman - Marriage and Family Ministry Director
tyohman@dioceseofcleveland.org

Joe Mikolajczyk - Marriage and Family Ministry Specialist
jmikolajczyk@dioceseofcleveland.org

Victoria Uhase - Marriage and Family & Human Life Program Assistant
vuhasa@dioceseofcleveland.org

Tony Dipre - Human Life Director
tdipre@dioceseofcleveland.org

A Prayer for Strength and Peace

Lord of mercy,

Be close to all who are hurting, confused, or afraid.

Bring light to the places of darkness in their lives.

Give them courage to seek safety, and surround them with people who care.

Restore their peace, renew their dignity, and remind them they are never alone.

Through Christ, our healer and our hope.

Amen.

HOPE & HEALING

For More Information:

WWW.DIOCESEOFCLEVELAND.ORG



Catholic Diocese
of Cleveland