



# Reaffirming Individual Dignity: Exposing Coercive Control

**CAUTION:** If you suspect that your loved one or a parishioner is a victim of abuse, proceed cautiously and remember that your own safety (and that of your own family) is also at risk. Note that abuse counselors customarily have security measures in place before they attempt to help a victim. Others ordinarily have no such protection. Your own reputation, psychological well-being, and physical safety could be targeted when you help someone who is a victim. Listen to podcasts such as the “When Dating Hurts” podcast to become aware of the risks that could be involved in controlling relationships. Reach out to Cleveland’s Family Justice Center, or other domestic abuse organizations, for guidance when you help a victim. One of the least risky ways that an outsider can help prevent coercive control and abuse is to encourage every person (no matter their marital status) to maintain historically important relationships meaningfully and independently.

For help, contact the **Cuyahoga County Family Justice Center** at 216-443-7345 or the National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233. Read USCCB’s “When I call for Help” for more information on the Church's response to domestic violence.

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# Article #7: December 2025 – January 2026

## ***Are you worried that a family member may be experiencing spousal coercive control/abuse?***

The tactics of coercive control that an abusive spouse uses to control a target spouse are often not physical or obvious. The tactics can be so hidden that you may not fully notice that someone you care about is experiencing them. Perpetrators of coercive control are skillful at concealing their abusive, controlling behavior. They typically mislead the target into hiding the controlling dynamic as well. Learning signs can help outsiders identify abuse.

### **Early Elation Turns into Confusion**

It is important to note that coercively controlled relationships seem ideal early in the relationship. Tactics labeled “mirroring” (pretend to share all of your values), “love bombing” (intense affection) and romantic covetousness (using up all time) secure the loyalty of the target and sometimes the target’s friends/family. In the beginning of the relationship, the target is elated and love struck. However, in a coercively controlled /abusive relationship, these tactics of building loyalty quickly alternate with emotional manipulation, isolation, and control. Family may notice that a target’s early elation at the new relationship is soon followed by looks of exhaustion, confusion, defensiveness, hollowness, and subtle humiliation - all while still presenting themselves as happy and claiming that the relationship is “great!”.

### **Decisions that are Out-of-Character**

Often, a target must give the appearance that they are willing & happy to comply with the controlling spouse because of how the controlling spouse will react if they don't. Though the target may maintain an “illusion of autonomy”\*\* and a veneer of happiness, you may note that the target continuously makes decisions that do not make sense, are out of character, and that increasingly overlook their own/their children’s needs. See the lists below for other possible red flags that an outsider may notice in the target spouse’s altered behavior.

### **Concerning Patterns Over Time**

Abuse/coercive control is a pattern of behavior – not an isolated incident. If your loved one is showing patterns of behavior indicating that they may be a target of abuse, educate yourself on the tactics used by coercive controllers. Reach out to a domestic abuse hotline or to a trauma-informed/abuse mental health professional for help determining what may be occurring and how you can best help. Note that couple’s counseling is explicitly contraindicated in situations of abuse, since couple’s therapy can inadvertently worsen a hidden abusive situation.

Concerning patterns of new behavior in a target of spousal abuse:

- They are always trying to please or calm their controlling spouse.

- They seem to have less and less meaningful connection with their prior family/friends.
- Their controlling spouse constantly calls or texts them when they are out.
- They say that their spouse insists on coming with them.
- They no longer have alone time.
- They lose their sense of spontaneity, humor, concern, calm, self-esteem, joy, and independent thought.
- They change from being a loving, concerned family member into someone who barely communicates with you. They look confused and exhausted but are defensive.
- They use scripture and Church teaching out of context to defend these changes.
- They become very defensive regarding their controlling spouse and their new way of life.

#### **Further details of patterns of behavior change in a target of abuse:**

- **Communication changes:**
  - Communication within historically important relationships becomes strained.
  - An increasing lack of meaningful communication with family of origin/historical friends.
  - Family/friends have an escalating sense that conversation is no longer private. If a private conversation does occur, it seems to be subject to later interrogation and intense scrutiny by the controlling spouse.
  - Increasingly odd, out-of-character, or off-putting email/text responses to prior friends/family that may indicate that the controlling spouse monitors the target spouse's written communication (signs of technology-facilitated abuse).
- **Relationship changes:**
  - The target suddenly seems happiest with the controlling spouse's family/friends while at the same time suddenly uncomfortable having much meaningful connection with their own family/friends.
  - Historically important relationships suddenly become subject to negative scrutiny.
  - Historically happy events suddenly become subject to negative scrutiny. The target may question their family in a new, accusatory way leaving the family feeling unsettled and confused. A controlling spouse works to reinterpret the target's private memories in a negative light in order to disrupt the bonds of prior relationships.
  - The target's time, friends, money, talents, and children are consistently exploited primarily for the controlling spouse's gain.

- **Autonomy/thought changes:**

- The controller becomes the main focus of the target's life and concern.
- The target has intense empathy solely for the controlling spouse's emotions and desires to the detriment of any other point of view.
- A pathological loyalty to the controller and the controller's ideas. The target consistently "JADEs" (Justifies, Argues, Defends, or Excuses) any of their controlling spouse's negative behavior and actions.
- When family/friends raise concerns, the target voices "thought terminating clichés"\*\*.
- The target displays a growing loss of self-confidence and an increasing dependence upon the controlling spouse for decision making, including on ideas of right and wrong.

- **Identity/personality-trait shifts:**

- A blurring of identities - the target loses main areas of their own identity and seems to assume the controlling spouse's identity.
- The target, who was a humble, courteous, other-centered, and concerned family member prior to this relationship has now become increasingly distant, dismissive, and seemingly conceited.
- May develop a problematic level of rumination, regret, anxiety, sadness, confusion, self-blame, self-doubt, hypervigilance, exhaustion, frustration, and social anxiety – usually compounded by problems sleeping, changes in appetite and difficulty concentrating. Can develop a dissociation from their own needs, wants and their true nature.

**\*\*Definitions\*\***

***Illusion of autonomy:*** A target thinks that he/she makes a certain decision independently, when in actuality the target only made the decision due to the controlling person's covert emotional /psychological manipulation. The target may have elusive feelings of losing parts of him/herself but proceeds to convince themselves that they really do want each of these uncharacteristic, illogical decisions. In the end, a pattern emerges where the target repeatedly acts against their own best interest (or against the best interest of their children/those they love) in order to provide a small benefit to the controlling spouse.

***Thought terminating clichés:*** complex human issues are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. These become the start and finish of any ideological analysis. Unlike easily memorized phrases used by schools or the Church to provide a starting point to open up discussion and thought, these clichés are taught by a controlling spouse in order to evade analytical discussion or thought. (Cults Inside Out: How People Get In and Can Get Out, by Rick Alan Ross).

# Article #6: November 2025

## *Exposing Tactics of Isolation*

Coercive control is a term used to streamline observations of diverse spousal abuse tactics by comprehending that CONTROL and ISOLATION are the preliminary goals of all forms of abuse (emotional, spiritual, psychological, sexual, financial, and physical abuse). In this segment, the “isolation” aspect will be investigated.

The ISOLATION in a coercively controlled marriage is a pattern of limiting with whom, how often, when and/or how a target spouse is able to speak with their family of origin and other historically important people.

Isolation is one of the earliest indicators of future overt abuse. Initially, the target is very charmed, and love struck by all the demands for attention, but then quickly starts becoming more and more cut off from important others. The target becomes especially isolated from anyone who is skeptical of the controlling partner’s behavior.

Isolation can be imposed in an overt manner, such as by explicitly demanding little or no contact with prior important people. However, it is more likely that the isolation will be accomplished covertly using emotional manipulation, psychological abuse and/or sabotaging previously important relationships.

Since covert isolation may be difficult to ascertain, some early red flags of covert isolation are listed below, as well as some examples of the tactics that may be occurring behind the scenes. If several of these red flags are noticed and fit into an overall pattern of concern, it may be time to reach out for assistance.

Early red flags:

The target’s friends may be puzzled to find that certain topics of conversation may suddenly become tense, confusing, or outright prohibited - especially when conversation used to be easy and when those topics were never a problem before.

Friends may also feel that the target’s calendar is suddenly “suffocated”, primarily filled with the controlling partner’s priorities to the detriment of almost all other concerns.

Frequently, the controlling partner insists on coming with the target on the rare occasions that the target is able to schedule time with old friends.

The target seems to feel that the controlling partner is entitled to all of the target’s time and energy – no matter what.

The target may also reveal that they feel guilty for doing anything without the controlling partner.

A friend may notice subtle changes in the nature of the goodwill of the friendship.

As time progresses, the target may lose much of their old spontaneity, humor, concern, calm, self-esteem, joy, and independent thought. The target may seem like “a different person” to their old friends – who are shocked to realize that their old friend has become a person that “we’d never have been friends with”.

Rather quickly, friends feel confused and discarded enough to decrease their interactions.

Examples of covert isolation tactics:

Emotional manipulation – the controlling spouse uses subtle rewards and punishments to get the target to want what they want. For example, the controlling spouse has a pattern of starting arguments just prior to a planned gathering of the target’s family/friends, making the target less comfortable about going (possibly also bestowing special intimacy if the target actually cancels plans with their own family/friends). There may be a pattern of the controlling spouse inexplicably exhibiting several days of a sad/bad mood when the target does visit their own friends/family. This is combined with a pattern of bestowing good mood/praise/ affection/intimacy when the target visits the controlling spouse’s preferred family/friends. Because good moods and intimacy can be hard to come by, the target begins to do anything to earn a good day. The target subconsciously starts avoiding their own friends/family while at the same time feeling most comfortable and happy with the controller’s friends/family.

Psychological abuse -- the controlling spouse interrogates and scrutinizes their target’s private conversation with family/friends to a degree that it does not allow the target spouse any privacy, autonomy, or freedom to have meaningful independent communication with their own family and friends. The controlling spouse is always “watching, listening and managing”, even if they are not there. “Wrong” conversations are punished. The abusive questioning goes well beyond normal marital conversations and dips into an invasive, interrogation realm meant to destabilize the target’s trust in their prior relationships.

Relationship sabotage -- a more heinous example of covert isolation is when a controlling spouse inserts “concerns” about impropriety (such as infidelity or even incest) into the target’s mind in order to disrupt the target’s desire to meaningfully maintain their prior important, healthy, normal relationships. Even a suggestion of impropriety may cause a target spouse to have feelings of manufactured revulsion to privately maintaining prior healthy, important relationships.

Social encapsulation: “but I have lots of friends!” An important element of coercively controlled isolation is that the target spouse is not necessarily completely isolated from all social contact. In fact, “social encapsulation” is a more common method of isolation. “Social encapsulation” is a term used in cult literature, describing when a target is isolated from their own family/friends and is instead purposefully surrounded only by other cult members. Similarly, isolation in a coercively controlled marriage does not necessarily mean that the target is completely alone (although it may mean that). Instead, the target has been convinced by the controlling spouse that only the target’s prior important

relationships are unsuitable, unworkable, or even shameful. Counterintuitive to the common understanding of isolation, the target spouse frequently becomes surrounded by many people – however, upon closer review, it becomes evident that the people surrounding the target include only those people who support the controlling spouse and encourage compliance to the controlling spouse’s demands or views. Remember: isolation does not mean one is physically alone. It means one is essentially, effectively alone.

A note to a victim:

If a historically trustworthy person from your life prior to this marital relationship now mentions concerns about your relationship, listen independently with an open mind. It can be perilous to dismiss the concerns of historically important people. The historically trustworthy person likely wants the best for you – particularly if that person is able to evaluate objectively. Consider that this historically important person may be recognizing guile that you might be missing or denying. There is little harm in taking time to do independent, and to perhaps call a domestic abuse hotline anonymously to learn more about red flags to watch for. Listening and doing your own research does not mean you have to act upon what you learn. In fact, research may reassure you that your relationship is, in fact, healthy.

If multiple historically important people have raised concerns to you, evaluate yourself – might you be defending someone who is systematically removing people from your life who might have helped you recognize manipulation? Could your changing social world be evidence of a successful isolation technique? Could it be that this is not a “communication problem” requiring “couples therapy” -- but actually evidence of psychological abuse requiring individual, trauma-informed mental health/abuse specialist to help untangle? The wrong diagnosis gives you the wrong treatment, and going to the wrong kind of counselor can make things worse. Take time alone to think, study and learn. No matter what kind of marriage you have, maintaining your independent supportive networks and your alone time is fundamental to your well-being.

Beware of being told to cut off your friends and family, for any reason. This is a warning sign. Don’t allow your life to revolve around just one person. Ninety percent of people would want you to have friends and to spend time with family members.



# Article #5: October 2025

## ***What is the “control” of coercive control?***

Coercive control is a term used to streamline observations of diverse spousal abuse tactics by comprehending that CONTROL and ISOLATION are the preliminary goals of all forms of abuse (emotional, spiritual, psychological, sexual, financial, and physical abuse). In this segment, the “control” aspect will be investigated.

The CONTROL in a coercively controlled marriage is a pattern of extensively controlling minute, detailed aspects of a target spouse’s everyday life to such a degree that the target begins to lose their sense of self. Minute aspects of life are controlled, inspected, and discussed to an exhaustive degree. Day-to-day decisions - such as how to dust one’s house, how to clean dishes, the frequency or order of vacuuming, creating vacuum lines/lawnmower lines, rules about how to shower, which soap to use and how, when to use the toilet, how much to sleep, minute details of what to eat and how to prepare it, extensive/minute details of childcare, etc. - are controlled exhaustively through much of the day, every day, in a coercively controlling relationship.

Influence over small daily activities seems unimportant, at first – and is, in fact, a part of compromise in most relationships. However, if an overarching, meticulous pattern of one-sided control becomes evident, something more is happening. Mundane activities involve small acts of spontaneous human creativity, dignity, and free will. If a pattern of abusive coercive control dominates, then these activities devolve into robotic capitulation to the controlling spouse’s will. The problem with the activity is not the activity itself (nor how the activity is done), but that it is an incessant pattern of control in daily life that is being forced upon the target spouse in an abusive manner and with a frequency and invasiveness that takes away the target spouse’s liberty, dignity, energy, and autonomy.

The target is coerced to go along with the control due to a system of rewards and punishments. The target hopes life will be better if they placate. Initially, minimal placating does abate bad days -- however, in abusive relationships a pattern emerges where the controller imposes more and more rules, and the target loses more and more freedom. Controlling tactics commonly escalate to include control over the flow of outside information (such as which news sites the target can or cannot get information from) and control over communication with others (such as which relatives and old friends the target is persuaded to or deterred from speaking with). The controlling spouse likely will organize, expend, or supervise the target’s independent alone time. The controlling spouse may also invade all of the target’s private time with God, demanding when and how the target spouse must pray, even during private prayer.

Technology-facilitated abuse is common in current times. This includes using any technology (including Mass videos streamed online) to stalk, harass, monitor, bully, intimidate or control. It also includes a controlling spouse freely accessing the target’s private email, text, phone, social media accounts and/or their private online search history

in order to stalk, intimidate and control the target's communication with the outside world. A controlling spouse may impersonate their target in online conversations. In severe situations, a controlling spouse may install video cameras about the house/car or may even induce the target to think that a monitoring device has been implanted inside their body, thus causing the target to behave in a robotic and uncharacteristically controlled way, even in private.

As noted, video streaming of Masses can be exploited in technology-facilitated abuse. A controlling spouse is able to monitor from afar where a target goes to Mass, how they and/or the children act at that Mass, and with whom they sit and converse. To help prevent videoed Mass from being misused in this way, focus the camera only upon the priest/altar. Do not record the congregation (even during reception of Communion). Preferably, several non-videoed Mass options would be made available throughout the diocese each weekend. Scheduling and publicizing several options for weekend Masses which are entirely free of videography is a helpful way to assist both current victims and also survivors who are trying to rebuild their private spiritual lives away from the abusive person. Another way to be cognizant of technology-facilitated abuse is to be aware that offering a victim a phone line to use can be a lifeline to those victims whose own cell phones are closely monitored by their abuser.

## **Article #4: September 2025**

October is both Respect Life Month and Domestic Violence Awareness Month. To highlight this connection, the Office for Human Life has dedicated week four of their Respect Life resources to focusing on domestic violence. You can access their comprehensive Respect Life Month Tool Kit and more information on their page [here](#).

# Article #3: August 2025

## ***What is coercive control?***

**Coercive control** is a term used to streamline observations of diverse spousal abuse tactics by comprehending that CONTROL and ISOLATION are the preliminary *goals* of *all* forms of abuse.

Many well-meaning outsiders focus on whether certain forms of abuse are occurring (“has he hit you?”, etc.), rather than noticing the goal – which is the day-to-day control & the comparative isolation that the abuse is intended to cause.

The various *forms* of abuse are simply the tools that are used to degrade the target spouse until they comply with the objective of control and isolation. The tools and tactics that a controlling spouse uses can fall under the categories of emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse, and physical abuse. Because no target actually wants to be controlled and isolated, the controlling spouse uses various escalating tactics of abuse until the target is coerced to comply with the control/isolation.

A controlling spouse frequently exploits the target’s normal human emotions of fear of abandonment/loss (including taking away children) and fear of public shame. The controlling spouse can also exploit the target’s fear for personal physical safety.

Many times, the forms of abuse are easily hidden from the public. However, the resulting control and comparative isolation may be more easily recognized by outsiders. Thus, control and isolation can serve as red flags of hidden abuse.

Control and isolation are used by a controlling spouse in order to maintain power over the target spouse. The control and isolation imposed greatly diminish a target spouse’s autonomy, dignity, and liberty. A coercively controlled marriage is destructive. It is not “teamwork”, it is not “compromise”, and it is not a “holy example” of “submission” - though it may claim to be those things.

Almost half of all women *and* men in the U.S. have experienced psychological aggression by their partner. One in four women, and one in seven men, have also experienced physical abuse by their partner. (National Domestic Violence Hotline statistics) No human person is born free from sin. A common sin is giving into the desire to control others. Catholic marriages are not immune to coercive control and abuse. Fortunately, the Catholic faith is noteworthy in its long history of defending truth, exposing untruth, championing human dignity, and emphasizing the primacy of respecting each person’s uniqueness and free will in accepting even God’s invitations. Church teaching is ideally situated to defend the innocent and to encourage healthy, sacred relationships which honor the dignity, autonomy and liberty of the individuals involved.

In the following months, stay tuned to learn more about how to identify and help prevent abuse and coercive control in marriage.

## **Article #2: July 2025**

This past month there were three shootings in North East Ohio involving domestic violence that I have been made aware of. I only saw one of them in the news and it makes me wonder how many other lives were lost to the scourge of domestic violence.

We are continuing our efforts to increase education and awareness about this very serious and troubling subject matter. It can be overwhelming but we must not remain silent. We as church are called to break the silence.

October is Domestic Violence awareness month and we will continue to share resources that can be highlighted in your parish bulletins or on websites. St. Dominic's will host an awareness session in October. If you would like to host a program please reach out to get on the calendar. Thank you for the willingness to remain open to this call for change.

# Article #1: June 2025

Some abused spouses believe that the Catholic Church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. They may hesitate to seek a separation or divorce. Well-meaning family members, fellow parishioners and clergy may further encourage a person to stay in an abusive relationship. However, the US Catholic Bishops emphasize that "no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage". ("When I call for Help") Violence and abuse, not divorce, break up a marriage. The abuser has already broken the marriage covenant through his or her abusive behavior.

Children suffer abuse *just by witnessing* one spouse abuse another. For the wellbeing of the children and of the target spouse, it is important to highlight that primary needs of victims are: being heard, being believed, having knowledgeable people available to speak with, eventually learning about coercive control, and, if needed and when ready, getting safely away from the abusive situation. Safety from abuse is a primary concern but it must be coordinated carefully, since any form of abuse can escalate the situation into violence. Clergy, family members and friends are all welcome to call domestic violence hotlines and shelters to get more information any step of the way.

Church clergy, family and fellow parishioners can prevent harm by educating themselves about coercive control and abuse. They can become proficient in recognizing and resisting coercive control tactics - tactics such as covertly isolating and controlling. Motivated parishioners and clergy can reach out to the Marriage and Family Office and are welcome to connect with local abuse victim centers for continued education. This summer a team of trainers will be presenting to deacons and their wives at the St Lawrence institute and that presentation can be replicated at a deanery or parish. We will continue to have content in this newsletter also.