



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 that allow victims to tell their dating & domestic violence stories 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.

Segment #10

High Conflict Personalities

About 80-90% of people are trustworthy in that they are who they say they are and will do what they say they will do and who will otherwise follow most of the social rules that help everyone live together relatively peacefully.

Another 10% of people are the reverse of the majority – they turn societal norms upside down by lacking empathy, remorse and/or self-control. These 10% can ruin others' lives, reputations, self-esteem, career, finances, sanity, and physical health with their pattern of unrestrained, aggressive behavior. Unsurprisingly, this 10% is overrepresented in perpetrators of domestic abuse, cultish relationships and leaders of cultish groups. Reacting appropriately to this 10% usually requires the complete opposite tactics compared to how a situation would normally be handled with the 80-90% majority.

High-Conflict Personalities and their Targets of Blame

People in the destructive 10% category discussed are said to have a “**High-Conflict Personality**” (HCP). They have a life-long pattern of externalizing inner turbulence by pinning it onto innocent targets (who are discussed in the next paragraph). Over time, HCPs show a pattern of lack of remorse, lack of empathy or lack of self-control. The HCPs are preoccupied with their public image - which is very different from their non-public character. They like to wear the mask of a hero leader, but over time it is noticeable that they rarely have consistent values beyond self-promotion. HCPs tend to set numerous, unreasonable limits upon others, imposing excessive, unreasonable consequences if a limit is crossed – while those around the HCPs tend to be persuaded by the HCP to misapply empathy by setting little to no limits on the HCP's bad behavior and to almost never impose any consequences upon the HCP.

When HCPs have the drive to dominate or destroy another person they act like adult bullies. HCP's choose innocent “**Targets of Blame**” that they mercilessly attack, often for months or years, even if the initial conflict was minor. The initial conflict that the HCP creates or escalates is not really about the Target, or about the stated issue, although it may look that way from the outside. HCPs are persuasive blamers who frame situations backward and convince others to get it backward, too, creating an “anti-community” of Negative Advocates around themselves.

Negative Advocates and the Church Community

Many people and institutions assume that others operate in a reasonable way, following social rules. People get caught off guard and become confused when they encounter an HCP, since the HCP manipulates trust and subtly breaks social rules. Often, well-meaning people inadvertently become a **Negative Advocates** for the HCP against the innocent Target of Blame, unquestioningly adopting and supporting the HCP's story. Empathy that should be bestowed by the community upon the innocent Target is instead cunningly redirected by and towards the HCP. Empathy, misused this way, makes a high conflict bully situation crueler.

Negative Advocates accidentally enable and escalate the high-conflict, bullying, abusive behavior. They make the situation worse by not understanding that the HCP is living and playing by different rules. They do not realize that in an HCP bully situation, the HCP's stated issue is not the issue – *the HCP's personality is the issue*.

The Church community is one group that is presently particularly vulnerable to being manipulated by HCPs. This vulnerability is due to a combination of the Church's mission to welcome, support, empathize and forgive anyone who claims to share their mission - combined with the modern breakdown of the old screening processes and accountability methods that used to exist in tight-knit family communities. Screening for HCPs is now up to the individual.

What is the Church's plan for furthering her mission while being targeted for misuse by individuals who have ill-intent? Awareness is step one. Limiting the power of bullying behavior is step two.

It is proper for individuals within the Church community to become aware of high-conflict personalities in order to protect themselves and to help deescalate damaging situations. HCP bullies are addicted to power and prestige. Having more power and prestige will only make them worse and cause their innocent victims to suffer more. Communities know not to give alcohol to an alcoholic. Communities can also learn not to give power, prestige and control to high conflict personalities. More about negative and positive advocates will be discussed in Segment 12.

How to spot a High-Conflict Personality

High-conflict personalities have four enduring, primary characteristics: lots of all-or-nothing thinking (little nuance), intense unmanaged emotions, extreme behavior/threats (stalking, controlling, lying, violence) and a preoccupation with bullying and blaming innocent Targets of Blame. With HCPs, “the issue is not the issue” – instead, their high-conflict pattern of behavior is the real issue.

It is easy to fall for an HCPs charms. HCPs often have a dual persona – they are a sugar-coated person in public and a completely different person in private. An HCP often can appear more persuasive while lying than an honest person appears when telling the truth. Learning red flags of an HCP can help prevent falling for the con.

One red flag indicating an HCP is that they do something *extremely negative* that 90% of people would *never* do - such as destroy child’s favorite toy; angrily and suddenly yell very loudly at a gathering; demand special treatment in a public setting; hit a random stranger; isolate their spouse from prior important relationships.

Another red flag is that one may sense a sudden, inexplicable emotional impulse to “fight, flight, freeze or fawn” in the presence of an HCP, though one feels silly about feeling this way around the HCP and cannot explain why do. “Fight, flight or freeze” responses are self-explanatory. The “fawn” response is the inexplicable urge to over-flatter someone. A person’s intuition and emotion may be responding to subtle manipulations by the HCP that their mind has not caught up to yet.

A third red flag is an intense increase of turmoil within a community after the HCP joins it, though it will not seem like the turmoil is coming from them. HCPs tend look for and subtly escalate conflicts that are just under the surface of communities.

These are all hints that one should give pause before trusting that person with public support or with any position of prestige, power, or authority. Patterns emerge over months and years, and it is best to wait and watch.

In general, remember not to “over-do” responses to any person (or that person’s family) in the beginning years of a relationship. Do not over-flatter, over-care, over-help, over-invite, over-engage, or over-attend to dramatics. Do not publicly promote someone new or someone with a pattern of concerning traits. Do not make it easy to quickly ascend to multiple positions of public spotlight (many times, their spouse or children may be used as pawns for their own image, also). In

general, move slowly, hire slowly, select volunteers slowly, limit public spotlight options.

Stay tuned next week to learn more about personality disorders associated with HCP behavior.

The above are summaries and excerpts from the following authors. For more information, see their complete works:

- 5 Types of People Who Can Ruin Your Life: Identifying and Dealing with Narcissists, Sociopaths, and Other High-Conflict Personalities, by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., copywrite 2018
- Dating Radar: Why Your Brain Says Yes to 'The One' Who Will Make Your Life Hell", by Bill Eddy & Megan Hunter, copywrite 2017
- Dr Peter Malinoski, Catholic trauma therapist, SoulsAndHearts.com