



# 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 #12

## ***Conclusion - Become a Positive Advocate***

In the past eleven segments many topics were examined in order to better protect our Church communities from unnecessary turmoil. Specifically, the “adult bully” traits of coercive control, spousal abuse, cults/cultish relationships, spiritual abuse and high-conflict personality disorders were all explored.

To simplify the concluding discussion of this document, these traits will be consolidated into the term “high-conflict personality bully” (or “HCP bully”). Equipping our Church with knowledge about HCP bullies can help support the dignity of every individual and the development of truly healthy marriages. It can also help us identify and curb bullying tendencies within ourselves. Knowing how to become a Positive Advocate will help greatly in forming healthy individuals, families and communities who can better evangelize the Gospel message.

## **How to Spot and Stop a Bully**

Frequently, high-conflict bullying people cause the most turmoil when well-meaning people inadvertently become Negative Advocates, supporting the HCP bully and the HCP bully’s story, while wrongly condemning the bully’s innocent targets. These well-meaning people confuse a person mimicking victimhood with a genuine victim, thus accidentally enabling and escalating high-conflict, abusive behavior into a problem that can further harm not only the bully’s target, but also negatively affect an entire community over the long term.

HCP bullies rely on people’s naivety and tolerance in order to maintain and grow power. Since Church communities are encouraged to be very welcoming, forgiving, conflict-averse, self-doubting, self-blaming people, they are vulnerable to accidentally becoming recruited as Negative Advocates if they blindly offer these virtues without discernment. Gullibility in a parish innocently contributes to an HCP’s bullying ability and helps the HCP bully succeed at getting more power in the Church community - making the situation worse for the innocent targets instead of better.

The first solution is for parishioners to become educated on common tactics used by HCP bullies so as to recognize the manipulations and not support them or those efforts. Control of day-to-day life and sabotage of prior important relationships are

two major tactics that can be easily noticed by outsiders. Tactics that outsiders may only see hints of include deceit, use of fear, use of shame and a public image that contrasts greatly with private reality.

The second solution is in standing strong with others against HCP bullying tactics. A reasonable caution is not promoting people (or their family) until several years of good character in both public and in private spheres is confirmed. Another helpful effort is to frequently vocally support the dignity of every individual to have autonomy in critical thinking, the ability to read outside information, and independence in maintaining prior relationships. An HCP bully will likely move on to a more naïve community if people promote his/her family slowly, expose manipulative tactics and help innocent targets learn how to maintain autonomy.

Awareness of the issue of HCP bullies and Negative Advocates is increasing in the legal and judicial spheres – places that HCP bullies used to easily prey upon. Awareness in Church communities is needed, too, in order to help recognize, expose, and resist the HCP bully behavior there as well.

## **More Information about Negative Advocates**

Learning more about characteristics of Negative Advocates can help avoid accidentally becoming one.

Negative Advocates are the enablers of the HCP bully who unconsciously get the situation backward. Without much question and without doing much individual research, a Negative Advocate naively jumps to conclusions and sincerely adopts the HCP bully's opinions and emotions. They shut down alternative information. They ignore red flags (such as lack of self-control or lack of remorse). If Negative Advocates notice the HCP's bullying behavior at all, they disregard it or minimize it as a merely a ridiculous quirk. They simply cannot imagine that the HCP bully would accuse their own victim of being the bully.

Negative Advocates quickly advocate strongly for the HCP bully's inaccurate or false story. The Negative Advocate gets directly involved in the HCP bully's conflict by aggressively attacking the HCP bully's perceived enemy (the innocent Target of Blame). Even though they are not normally a bully themselves, the Negative Advocate will find themselves acting like a bully on behalf of the HCP bully. Because they get emotionally hooked and try to "protect" the "victim" HCP from their "evil" Target of Blame – they are helping the wrong person in the wrong way. One of the

first warning signs that a person is a Negative Advocate is that they tend to get highly and disproportionately emotional over a small issue on behalf of the HCP bully.

Negative Advocates can get so emotionally hooked that they can even turn against their own family of origin on behalf of the HCP bully. An HCP bully's love interest/spouse frequently becomes this kind of adamant Negative Advocate.

Negative Advocates tend to hold more sway over public opinion than the original HCP bully – which is why the HCP bully recruits them. HCP bullies are usually able to recruit new Negative Advocates on a regular basis – at least for a short time (several years). The more Negative Advocates there are, the more likely the HCP bully will continue to attack their innocent Target of Blame and never resolve the dispute. As people slowly realize the reality of the situation, they tend to quietly distance themselves from the HCP bully without blowing the whistle on the bullying behavior. Since it only takes one Negative Advocate to validate the cognitive distortions of an HCP bully, one Negative Advocate is enough for them to continue their blame and bullying of their innocent victim.

Innocent Targets of Blame are often caught by surprise by presence of and the intensity of the HCP bully's Negative Advocates. In a cruel twist, many of the Negative Advocates might have been the Target's prior friends, whom the HCP bully cunningly and slowly misled over months or years before the Target even knew what was happening. The Targets of Blame are often overwhelmed and devastated. The Negative Advocates will suddenly approach the Target of Blame and try to persuade them to change their behavior to accommodate the HCP bully. The Negative Advocate may assist the HCP bully in spreading rumors or legal claims against the Target of Blame. This is sometimes referred to as "abuse-by-proxy". The same types of behavior that the HCP bully engaged in is now supported by more than just one person – and it becomes a mob against the innocent Target of Blame who only belatedly realizes what has happened.

Societally, Negative Advocates are harmful. First, Negative Advocates fail to hold the HCP bully accountable, which lets the HCP bully (and their Target) know that there will be no meaningful social consequences to the bad behavior. Second, Negative Advocates fail to resist the HCP bully's attempts to gain power and prestige. In fact, they tend to get personally involved with the HCP in the wrong way, offering practical, emotional or financial support *to the HCP bully* placing the entire community on a wrong (and likely harmful) track for years to come.

Negative Advocates can be equated to enablers or codependents of an alcoholic or drug addict. By siding with the HCP bully, the Negative Advocates enable the HCP to remain “sick”, stuck in their dysfunctional behavior, emotions, and thoughts by reinforcing them. This often encourages the HCP bully to become more aggressive in their negative behavior towards their innocent Targets of Blame. On a hopeful note, if these advocates were to stop enabling HCP bullies, the number of disputes and the harm caused by those disputes would be greatly reduced.

## **Become a Positive Advocate**

No one should suffer an HCP bully alone, particularly within the Church community – thus it is important to learn to be a Positive Advocate. Supportive, knowledgeable people within faithful communities can have more influence than they realize. The following are traits of a Positive Advocate.

Positive Advocates support a victim with friendship, a listening ear, and interest in gaining more knowledge about how best to understand abuse dynamics and how to help support and guide the victim. Positive Advocates regularly ask themselves if the facts they are operating on are true. They think about a person’s pattern of behavior over many years, monitoring character. They are aware that an HCP bully’s public persona conflicts with their private life, so Positive Advocates pay attention to how people promoting themselves treat their own children, their own family of origin, their in-laws and their old friends. Positive Advocates double- and triple- check from multiple, diverse educational sources – including reading books, articles and research -- all while ensuring that they are not putting the potential victim in further danger. They do not minimize, normalize or dismiss what is happening. They continue to try to help the victim understand the situation, plan ahead, compile information, give plenty of time to discuss the situation, and help the victim find resources.

Positive advocates remain a consistent, though slightly distant support. They do not get emotionally hooked. They do not attack anyone on behalf of the victim but instead are actively spending time and energy reading and researching to understand the situation and to help the victim help themselves.

Positive Advocates are aware that neutrality helps a bully. They keep an eye out for patterns of behavior over years. Once certain pattern emerges, they help the true story be heard by exposing how the HCP bully is playing the victim. They help hold

the HCP bully accountable with social consequences. All the while, they are still reading and learning and watching to double check their own interpretation of events.

A caveat: Christian and Catholic communities that learn about abuse dynamics sometimes fall into the trap of focusing on educating and “reforming” HCP abusers – rather than on educating and supporting general parishioners to recognize abuse dynamics and patterns. Frequently, this leads only to helping an abuser learn how to better hide their abuse behind a Christian façade, that only further hurts their innocent targets. On the other hand, generally exposing *the dynamics of abuse* can help the most. Exposing coercive dynamics helps victims/targets recognize and understand the pattern that tricked them, can help the victim and supporters find clarity and dignity, can help the victim work towards safety and can hold the abusive person accountable for actions, possibly influencing real reform in future.

## **Identifying a Genuine Victim vs Mimicking Victimhood**

Determining lies from truth is a difficult and complex issue that counselors, attorneys, judges and other mediators grapple with. Although a comprehensive, universal, definitive manual to determining truth from lies is not possible, many indicators have been relied upon to build understanding.

A genuine victim’s story is usually detailed, unchanging, nuanced, and may take time to understand. The victim’s later actions match the words of their story. If a friend tries to change the subject to another topic, the genuine victim will likely be hurt and ask to return to speaking about the original topic. This is because for a genuine victim, the “issue” really *is* the issue, and the victim is truly trying to solve a problem. If the victim’s story is not respected at first, they will try to produce more and more true, factual information for examination.

On the other hand, an HCP bully’s story mimicking victimhood is usually simple, vague (or contains rehearsed details), attractively and emotionally told, and is told differently to different people (tailoring fabrications for each person). The HCP bully’s story is frequently accompanied by tears or suggestive body movements. The HCP bully’s later actions may not match the words from their story. If a friend tries to change the subject to another topic, an HCP bully mimicking victimhood is likely to *allow* the change in subject, particularly if some empathy or respect was given first. This is because for an HCP bully, the “issue” *is not* the issue – the issue is actually the personality disorder. The HCP bully is OK with “issues” remaining

unresolved, since for them the real issue was gaining respect/allies, not resolving an issue. If the HCP bully mimicking victimhood is not respected at first, they will exhibit escalating emotions and increasingly dramatic emotional facts.

Scholars have identified two paths to persuasion, a central and a peripheral path. The central path to persuasion involves facts, ideas, and reasoning. Though accompanied by emotion, the facts are the center of the story. HCP bullies – since their stories are largely fabricated or exaggerated, cannot rely on facts. HCP bullies rely heavily on the peripheral path to persuasion. The peripheral path to persuasion involves coaxing the listener's subconscious awareness with a variety of ancillary factors: attractiveness of messenger, aggressiveness of messenger/language intensity, confidence of messenger, number of arguments made, shorter and simpler sentences, use of distractions, social role/group identification, and emotional appeal. These ancillary factors are substituted for logic and facts.

## **Conclusion**

*Reaffirm individual dignity, even – and especially – within marriage.*

This includes encouraging all individuals to: maintain their autonomy and privacy in thinking; freely and confidentially read outside information about coercive control dynamics; and meaningfully and independently maintain prior important, healthy relationships.

For more information:

- 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
- It's All Your Fault! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything, by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., copywrite 2008
- Our New World of Adult Bullies: How to Spot Them - How to Stop Them", by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., copywrite 2024
- The Academy of Professional Family Mediators, National Conflict Resolution Center