



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 #4

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. It is a malicious fracturing of attachment.

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.

It may be helpful to realize that in an abusive relationship, a target is allowed to have either integrity OR the relationship – they cannot have both. Loved ones may notice a target losing integrity, or losing wholeness, including losing meaningful connections with prior loved ones, in order to keep the relationship.

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.
- The target feels guilty for doing anything without the controlling partner. The target insists on bringing the controlling partner along to most places (or brings them unannounced). During the rare occasions when the target *does* schedule individual time with family or old friends, the target seems uncomfortable, frequently checks the time and phone texts during that visit. The target looks nervous, as if they have strict orders to return home at a certain time. The target may try to visit at odd hours, so as to avoid potentially agitating the controlling spouse.
- The target seems to feel that the controlling partner is entitled to all of the target's time and energy – *no matter what*.
- 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 to fill their lives mostly with people who agree with the controlling spouse – while also convincing them that any of the target's prior important relationships that question the controlling spouse's manipulation are the relationships which are unsuitable, unworkable, or 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 research, 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. Stay curious! And remember, you are allowed to have your own private thoughts and feelings, separate from your spouse.

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.

Beware if you start to lose your identity in order to maintain the couple identity.