



# 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 #5

### ***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” (pretending to share all of your values/faking compatibility), information mining (gleaned *in order to exploit you* rather than to bond with you), “love bombing” (intense affection/charm, acting like a “knight in shining armor” or a “fairytale princess”) and romantic covetousness (using up all time and emotional energy) 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 loyalty-building 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, anxiety, depression, fear, and subtle humiliation - all while still presenting themselves as happy and claiming that the relationship is “great!”.

It is common for the target to feel that the controlling spouse “wears two masks” or has a “Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde split personality”. If this is part of an ongoing pattern, however, then it is more likely that it is an illusion of “two personalities” and is actually part of the emotional manipulation. The nice times of affection are used as a bribe, to draw the target back in after abuse/control and to keep the target hoping to get back to more “normal” good times again - if they just submit to the control. The nice parts are just as manipulative as the abusive parts. They are not real affection.

#### **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" (see definition below) 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" (see definition below).
- 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, fearfulness, 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 even a small benefit to the controlling spouse.

**Thought terminating cliches:** 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 cliches 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).

Final note for worried family and friends: Assertiveness, awareness, setting limits and imposing consequences upon the abuser is needed. Supporting victims in being authentic, gaining agency and having clarity on the situation is helpful. Ask open ended questions. Don't assume words mean what they used to mean, since controlling spouses twist meanings. If you notice a pattern of the above concerns but the target maintains things are "great", you may want to gently ask for details. Ask the target: "What did you mean when you said 'my spouse is always thoughtful' or 'I'm so much healthier now' or 'this is what we want' or 'of course I have alone

time'." Gently and curiously ask for details. You may discover the coercion below the veneer.