



What is domestic and family violence and coercive control?

Domestic and family violence is not about conflict – it's about power and control.

In a healthy relationship, there is an equal balance of power between partners, and both partners feel free to state their opinions and make their own decisions. **Love ≠ Control.**

Domestic and family violence is not always physical violence, it can take many forms including coercive control. Coercive control is a pattern of behaviours (which can be both physical and non-physical) perpetrated against a person to create a climate of fear, isolation, intimidation and humiliation*.

It might make you feel unsafe, scared, threatened, or like you are walking on eggshells. Over time, this behaviour can have a devastating impact on your autonomy, independence, personal wellbeing and safety.

All forms of abuse are serious and never acceptable.

Who can be impacted?

Domestic and family violence and coercive control can impact anyone. It can occur in romantic and intimate partner relationships, between family members, or in informal care relationships.

It can impact anyone regardless of age, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender or location.

Whilst coercive control can appear in all types of relationships, this fact sheet explores the behaviours that appear in intimate partner relationships.

How coercive control can start

It's not always easy to tell if a new relationship will become abusive as warning signs don't always appear immediately and may emerge and intensify over time as the relationship grows. However, there can be some early warning signs.

Love bombing can be an early warning sign, grooming you with overwhelming and unwavering attention, gifts, flattery and promises of commitment very early in a relationship, which can often make you feel special, loved and valuable*.

As the new relationship progresses, an abuser can be intensely persistent, or may seek to take the relationship into more serious stages, such as moving in together or getting married within the first few weeks or months. This quick acceleration of romance seeks to break down a person's barriers and is known as **commitment whirlwind**.

What might at first seem like romantic gestures, can start to be seen as warning signs or red flags if the abuser:

- demands to see partner multiple times a week and wants their full attention
- gets annoyed or makes their partner feel guilty when they make plans with family, friends or other people
- disrespects boundaries and turns up at places uninvited when their partner is out with family, friends or other people
- phones their partner constantly or sends multiple text messages while they are out with family, friends or other people

Love bombing ensures the abuser has control over your emotions and thoughts, and serves as a starting point for manipulation and the cycle of abuse*.

Coercive and other controlling behaviours

No two experiences of domestic and family violence are exactly the same, and some tactics and behaviours that may appear in one relationship, will not always appear in others.

While the complexities of coercive control can never be summarised completely, the Power and Control Wheel (figure 1) can present useful insight to the more common and known behaviours.



Figure 1: Power and Control Wheel co-created by Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, MN) and reproduced with approval from the Allison Baden-Clay Foundation.

Isolation

An abuser will try to cut their partner off from friends and family or limit contact, so that they don't receive the support they need. In an abusive relationship, the abuser might constantly accuse their partner of cheating on them to make the victim feel guilty about going out to see other people in order to isolate and reduce their contact with others outside the home. These tactics can lead the affected partner to become extremely dependent on their controlling partner.

Some common examples of behaviours that use **isolation** as an abusive tactic include:

- stops their partner from seeing friends or family
- does not allow their partner to leave the house without them or to participate in sport or attend social gatherings with family, friends and other people
- moves their partner away to a geographically-isolated location to further separate them from their support network
- needs to know everywhere their partner has been or is going to, or who they are with
- checks or interferes with their partner's mail, phone calls, text messages, emails or social media
- lies about their partner to friends and family or tries to turn others against them to disrupt their relationships
- deliberately does things to make their partner miss or be late for, events, appointments, social outings or meetings
- restricts access to their partner's car, other forms of transport, wheelchair, or mobility aids.

Coercion and threats

Coercion is the way in which an abuser gets their partner to do what they want or stop them from doing something they don't agree with. This is usually done through verbal or physical threats, causing fear and intimidation and takes away their partner's independence and ability to make decisions.

Some common examples of behaviours that use **coercion and threats** as an abusive tactic include:

- threatens to hurt or kill their partner's children, other family members, or pets
- threatens to spread information, including secrets or confidential details such as their partner's sexuality
- threatens to make reports about their partner to Centrelink, the Department of Immigration or Child Protection Services if they end the relationship or report the abuse
- threatens to commit suicide or self-harm if their partner ends the relationship.

Intimidation

When intimidation is being used in a relationship it is usually so the abuser can maintain control by making everyone in the house feel like they are in a constant state of fear and anxiety. It can be as simple as a look given from across the room and include actions that make the victim fear their own decision making or demonstrate that the abuser is capable of physical harm.

Some common examples of **using intimidation** can include:

- blames their partner for growing tensions in the household or for their own violent behaviour
- uses looks, actions or gestures to control what their partner does or says
- smashes or destroys property to demonstrate their strength
- slams doors, bangs the table, hits the wall, or throws something at their partner
- deliberately causes harm to their partner's pets
- displays a weapon or keeps a weapon in view or within reach.

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is not always easy to identify, but it can lead to lower self-esteem and lower confidence, impacting mental health and wellbeing. The abuser uses this behaviour to gain control over their partner and prevent them from leaving the relationship. Abusers might call their victim names, insult them, constantly criticise how they do things, bully and belittle. They might also put their partner down in front of others but pass it off with a comment like "I was only joking". Over time, even small jabs will eat away at the victim's self-worth.

Some common examples of behaviours that use **emotional abuse** include:

- constant criticism, put downs and name calling, often in relation to their partner's appearance
- plays mind games to make their partner feel selfish or guilty
- ignores their partner when they start a conversation, or gives them the silent treatment
- a lack of concern or care when their partner is sick, in hospital, recovering from giving birth to a baby, or just worn out and needing a break
- criticises their partner's strengths or achievements to diminish their spirit
- refuses to share responsibility for their children's care, education, and development
- tells their partner what they can wear.

Gaslighting: minimising, denying and blaming

Gaslighting, minimising, denying and blaming are forms of psychological abuse, aimed at the victim to confuse and manipulate. Gaslighting happens when the abusive partner denies their victim's version of circumstances and their memory, so that they begin to question their perception of reality and are accused of going crazy.

Some common examples of behaviours that use minimising, denying and blaming as an abusive tactic include:

- makes light of abuse that occurs and downplays the damage and injury they caused
- says the abuse didn't happen, or they didn't cause it
- says the abuse was not that bad, or the relationship is the best their partner can hope for
- shifts responsibility for abusive behaviour to their partner
- blames alcohol/stress/unemployment for their "loss of control"
- repeatedly apologises and says it won't happen again.

Power tactics with children

Abusers may weaponise parenting arrangements for children in the relationship to maintain power, including making demands about who is responsible for their care, undermining their partner's relationship with the children, calling their partner a bad parent or purposefully belittling them in front of the children. Some abusers will also threaten to take the children away, harm them, or threaten to call child protection services if they are not getting their own way. Using children as a "weapon" to influence and control is one area that may continue after separation, prolonging the abuse.

Some common examples of behaviours that use **children** as an abusive tactic include:

- uses the children's behaviour as an excuse for physically assaulting their partner
- criticises and tells their partner they are a bad parent
- uses access to the children as a way to harass or assault their partner
- threatens to take the children away
- threatens to harm the children or engages in risky behaviour with them
- makes children watch or participate in the abuse.

Privilege and gender stereotypes

Most people think of money or wealth when they hear the word privilege, but in the context of coercive control, privilege is related to beliefs and behaviours around gendered roles. Examples include expectations by the abuser as to how each gender is supposed to act and behave to gain advantage or control. An abuser using privilege might dictate their partner's responsibilities in the household, what they can and can't wear, what they can and can't eat and drink, how they style or present themselves, and when or how often they exercise.

Some common examples of behaviours **using privilege** as an abusive tactic include:

- treats their partner like a servant
- makes all the family decisions no matter how big or small, acts like the head of the household
- dictates whether their partner can work or study
- blaming "our culture" as the reason to limit physical movement
- demands sex or sexual acts
- removes or restricts access to transport.

Economic abuse

When an abuser limits a partner's access to money, bank accounts and credit cards, it can make it even harder to leave the relationship as it creates financial dependence on the abuser. This is especially common when children are involved. The abuser might provide their partner with an "allowance" and/or control how money can be spent. They may convince their partner to take out a loan, obtain a credit card or incur debt in their name. They may harass their partner at home and work, so they are no longer able to earn an independent income.

Some common examples of **economic abuse** include:

- gets angry about their partner spending money
- does not let their partner know the true details of the family's financial position
- takes their partner's pay cheque or restricts their access to joint bank accounts
- refuses to pay for essential items such as food and medications
- stops their partner from working or furthering their education
- destroys possessions, then forces their partner to pay for the repairs or replacement of items like mobile phones.

Technology, stalking and monitoring abuse

Technological abuse involves the use of technology to coerce, stalk or harass someone. An abuser will want to know where their partner is at all times, sometimes tracking them via their phone, wiring their house with cameras, webcams or recording devices, or tracking their car with GPS devices.

Some common examples of **technological abuse** include:

- harasses with constant text messages or phone calls when they are apart
- checks their partner's emails, phone, laptop and computer without their permission
- inhibits their partner's access to technology
- monitors their partner's internet usage and social media accounts, or actively abuses and humiliates them publicly on these platforms
- tracks their partner's movements with GPS devices, and turns up unexpectedly at social events or their workplace
- records their partner in their home, car or workplace (with or without their consent or knowledge)
- publishes sexually explicit images or videos of their partner online without their permission. This is also known as image-based abuse and is a form of sexual abuse and may be referred to as "revenge porn".

Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Council

The Queensland Government established the Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Council to support greater community understanding about domestic and family violence, and to challenge the values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that excuse or perpetuate this abuse.

Working at the primary prevention level, the Prevention Council partners with government, business and community stakeholders to champion local community-led action and leadership to create social change. Through enhanced education, understanding place-based responses, the Prevention Council works to ensure all Queenslanders can play their part in ending domestic and family violence.

Love ≠ Control

The Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Council has travelled across Queensland meeting with members of our community—victim-survivors of domestic and family violence and coercive control, and their friends and families—who have an important message to share: **Love ≠ Control**.

The **Love ≠ Control** initiative profiles ten Queenslanders who share their personal experience of the nature and impacts of domestic and family violence and coercive control, and how they accessed help and support to safely leave abusive relationships.

For more information on the **Love ≠ Control** initiative, contact: dfvcouncil@premiers.qld.gov.au

What is happening to end domestic and family violence and coercive control in Queensland?

Domestic and family violence and coercive control is a complex and pervasive issue across Queensland with devastating and long-lasting impacts to individuals and across our community.

In response to the Queensland Government's commitment to legislate against coercive control, the **Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce** (the Taskforce) was established in March 2021 as an independent, consultative taskforce to look at:

- coercive control and the need for a specific offence of domestic and family violence
- the experience of women and girls across the criminal justice system.

The Taskforce undertook extensive consultation across Queensland to guide their recommendations to the Queensland Government, outlined in *Hear her voice – Report One – Addressing coercive control and domestic and family violence in Queensland*, released 2 December 2021; and *Hear her voice – Report Two – Women and girls' experiences across the criminal justice system*, released 1 July 2022.

In response to the recommendations, the Queensland Government has committed to delivering a significant program of work across Queensland to prevent, and improve responses to, domestic, family and sexual violence and coercive control, including introducing legislation by the end of 2023 for a new offence to criminalise coercive control. This work continues to be underpinned by the Queensland Government Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Strategy 2016–2026.

In delivering this program of work, the Queensland Government will undertake further education to increase community awareness and understanding about the nature and impacts of domestic and family violence including coercive control.

Read about the Taskforce and recommendations: www.womenstaskforce.qld.gov.au

Read the Government response: www.qld.gov.au/womenstaskforceresponse

Endnotes

* Queensland Government (2023), Domestic and Family Violence Protection (Combating Coercive Control) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2022 Explanatory Notes.

† Queensland Police Service (2023), <https://mypolice.qld.gov.au/news/2022/12/08/signs-of-a-domestic-violence-relationship/>

‡ Queensland Police Service (2023), <https://mypolice.qld.gov.au/news/2022/12/08/signs-of-a-domestic-violence-relationship/>

Support options

Support is available for all Queenslanders impacted by any form of domestic and family violence, including coercive control.

For free, confidential crisis support

DVConnect Womensline (24/7): 1800 811 811

DVConnect Mensline

(9 am to midnight, 7 days): 1800 600 636

Mensline Australia (24/7): 1300 78 99 78

Kids Helpline (24/7): 1800 55 1800

In an emergency

Call Triple Zero (000) and ask for Police (24/7).

More information is available at
www.qld.gov.au/lovenotcontrol



www.qld.gov.au/dfvpreventioncouncil

*This information sheet is intended for general information only,
and it does not represent government policy or legal advice.*



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