

COERCIVE CONTROL CHECKLIST

The Coercive Control Checklist¹ includes twelve types of behavior “bricks” that wall off freedom. Each type identifies an effect it has on us. By the time you reach the end, you will have gained a greater understanding of why you feel the way you do. Coercive control often erodes self-confidence; the ability to identify our emotions, wants, and needs; and belief in our competence.

The list covers ten emotional and two physical effects. The examples listed aren’t exhaustive so an “other” line is included for adding things you’ve experienced. You can also adjust the details of each. The types are inter-related, so many achieve more than one result. The two physical injury lists always bring emotional harm as well.

Bricks of Seduction

Seductive behaviors often initially look harmless. Because of the frequency, context, and motivation, they gradually infringe on freedom. Conduct that seduces:

- Giving feedback because they want to be “helpful,” but it becomes intrusive and inappropriate
- Shopping so we “don’t have to go out”
- Discouraging efforts to work because “I’ll take care of you”
- Claiming he is jealous because “I love you”
- Calling constantly at work because of “worry” about us
- Picking out clothes and other possessions that “look good” on us
- Taking us to work or other activities so that others “don’t get the wrong ideas”
- Wanting us to spend all our time with them
- Manipulating us into doing things for them because they can’t do it as well
- Taking care of all financial transactions so that “you don’t have to concern yourself”
- Taking over work responsibilities to “teach” us the right way
- Other:

Seductive forms of control creep into a relationship and gradually escalate. The love and attachment we feel cause us to give them the benefit of the doubt. Even when you’re not okay with it, others may misinterpret what is happening because it initially looks harmless.

¹ My chart builds on the Power and Control Wheel, the Chart of Coercion, and the Controlling Behavior checklist of Schechter & Jones in *When Love Goes Wrong*.

We're often hooked by controllers who take advantage of our insecurities. We don't expect the person closest to us to manipulate our anxieties to benefit them and may not initially recognize it.

These behaviors act like quicksand, pulling us into the mire of other forms of abuse. We gradually accept things we never thought we would. It often takes time for us to understand why we're feeling the way we do.

Bricks of Isolation

When we're isolated, we have limited contact with others, making the controllers' perceptions and expectations dominant. This feeds their power and makes it easier to brainwash us, meaning control how we think. Isolation results when we experience intimate partners:

- Limiting contact with family or friends
- Picking a fight when we're leaving for an outside activity (work or home)
- Accusing us of being unloving or selfish when you engage in your interests
- Claiming that spending time with others is disloyal to the relationship
- Preventing us from meeting our work responsibilities, perhaps leading to being disciplined or fired
- Accusing us of being "unfaithful" or "uncaring" when we go out with friends
- Interrogating us about who we saw and what we did when we go out
- Requiring us to ask permission before leaving
- Spreading lies that cause others to reject or shun us
- Other:

We often give up our efforts to see others because it feels like we have to pay a heavy price, even if that means cutting off family, friends, and interests. This usually appears voluntary to others. They don't see how psychologically exhausting it is to maintain your rights. We may say something like "*He keeps on me until I can't take it anymore and it's just easier to give in.*"

Without friends or co-workers' perspectives to balance what controllers say, it's harder to maintain our own perceptions. Jobs or other activities outside the home give us opportunities to learn about ourselves, which can help generate greater strength in resisting a controlling partner's views. This explains why abusers often block these endeavors; they know they'll have less power over us.

Bricks of Devaluing Us

Destructive criticism and belittling comments over time result in feeling we're no good. This is the opposite of constructive feedback because it's not reasonable or respectful. Disparaging remarks attack our confidence, creating self-doubt and altering how we see ourselves. We feel devalued when we experience these behaviors:

- Criticizing our physical or mental characteristics (you'll never get anywhere looking like that; you're not smart enough)
- Picking apart our accomplishments
- Correcting everything we say
- Couching compliments with criticism (this is the first good meal you've made)
- Name-calling
- Putting us down for any mistakes we make
- Calling our wants or needs selfish
- Accusing us of being hysterical and out of control when we complain or try to discuss an issue
- Making fun of our opinions or spiritual beliefs
- Other:

Over time, devaluation increases hypervigilance. It may become difficult to accept constructive comments and even compliments from others.

Constant devaluing comments affect our morale, even when we don't believe what they say. We may live with a sense of injustice and spend a lot of energy standing up for ourselves.

Bricks of Negating Us

Negating behavior is the opposite of acknowledgement and acceptance. It results from having our perceptions, feelings, needs, and opinions denied, ignored and invalidated by:

- Denying what they did and claiming you're too sensitive or that you're making it up.
- Lying to others about what happened
- Interrupting or talking over you when there are disagreements
- Refusing to recognize your personal needs, such as clothing or sleep
- Talking about you as if you aren't there
- Walking away when you're speaking
- Ignoring what you've said
- Shaming you for what you believe
- Changing plans at the last minute so yours are disrupted
- Attributing your accomplishments to luck or someone else

- Other:

This leads to feeling invisible and like we don't matter. Combined with isolation, these behaviors increase the likelihood we will question our perceptions and judgments, even sometimes our sanity.

We are more vulnerable to coercive control as adult when we've received negating behavior during childhood because that inhibited confidence.

Bricks of Neglect

In intimate relationships, we expect love, caring, emotional support, respect, and consideration. We feel neglected and abandoned when partners:

- Give silent treatment
- Withhold money
- Conceal information or prevent you from making plans or doing your job (e.g. not telling us when they are bringing kids home; hiding important information for doing our job)
- Ignore requests
- Deny or restrict clothing, food, and other necessities
- Fail to give emotional support when we grieve (e.g. when a parent dies)
- Disregard or belittle our accomplishments (getting your degree)
- Prevent us from spending money or time on our interests
- Other:

These behaviors deepen the sense that we don't matter. Neglect of your interests may occur all the time or it may be used as punishment when we don't submit to them.

When children experience neglect, they are at increased risk for poor self-esteem and confidence, depression, and anxiety throughout their lives, unless they have corrective experiences like other caring adults or therapy.

Bricks of Betrayal

Intimacy makes us vulnerable. Betrayal exploits the trust and good will in an intimate relationship. Marriages and partnerships, dating relationships, and friendships are meant to be egalitarian with respect and equal power. Our dependence upon them for support, honest feedback, acceptance, and love leads to feeling betrayed when we experience:

- Threats to leave if we don't give in to what they want
- Calling our needs selfish while feeling entitled to theirs
- Using our confidences to ridicule or put us down later
- Lying to others about what we've done
- Changing commitments or decisions that were discussed
- Refusing to acknowledge problems or concerns
- Making decisions that affect us both without our input
- Setting double standards for our behavior and theirs resulting in their privilege
- Requiring us to ask permission but doing what they want without considering us
- Withholding financial or other important information
- Creating separate financial accounts for joint money without our name
- Neglecting all responsibilities for the family
- Limiting spending on personal necessities because we don't make as much money
- Questioning all our expenditures but buying anything they want
- Refusing to contribute money for household expenses
- Using social media to blame or accuse us
- Threatening to seek sex outside the relationship whenever we decline to be sexual
- Other:

The misuse of our vulnerability demonstrates a sense of entitlement and a willingness to exploit relationships. While these behaviors violate our sense of fairness, the deeper harm comes if we begin feeling like something is wrong with us and we're unlovable. We puzzle over why those who say they love us treat us like this and look for something that justifies it. Controllers of course encourage this by blaming us.

While our beliefs may differ regarding what fair looks like, we know when we're not experiencing love. Some believe men are the head of the household and have the final say, but even so, they don't condone disrespect and injustice. Betrayal and exploitation occur when values of fairness and respect within our cultural belief system are violated.

Bricks of Alienation from Children

These behaviors profoundly affect our well-being, even though they are not directed immediately at us. We have powerful bonds with our children and experience deep grief if anything comes between them and us. Many victims of this would say this was the most devastating wound they experienced. Besides the hurt we feel, we also ache for how it's affecting our children. Examples:

- Putting you down in front of the children
- Not allowing children to have any pictures of you

- Belittling any gifts or clothing you give so that children reject even those they like
- Forbidding the child to talk about you
- Withdrawing their love and approval from a child when they show any attachment to you
- Telling your children lies about you
- Saying you don't love the child or you are dangerous
- Confiding inappropriate information to the child
- Demanding children keep secrets from you
- Encouraging the child to use your first name instead of mom or dad
- Forcing children to reject you or choose between you, threatening not to see them if they don't
- Questioning the child about your activities or conspiring with them to spy on you
- Referring to a new stepparent or significant other as "mom" or "dad" and expecting the child to do so
- Withholding medical, academic, and other important information from you
- Changing the child's name
- Undermining your parenting authority by telling children they don't have to mind and going against discipline
- Cultivating dependency on them by telling children to check with them before they do any activities with you
- Telling children they are not safe with you
- Limiting contact with your children
- Interfering with your communication with the children (e.g. playing with them when they're on the phone or Skype, refusing to allow them to call)
- Preventing you from accessing your children's devices for safety monitoring
- Refusing to follow family court agreements
- Taking you to court falsely alleging claims of parental alienation or other misdeeds
- Other:

Children are vulnerable to this manipulation. Their dependence upon the abusive parent promotes their acceptance of what they are told. They often believe what they hear and report it as their own opinion. Children often deny any pleasant experiences or memories of the parent they have become alienated from.

They may act aggressively toward us during visitation. Children do not have the maturity to express what is happening. The sole comfort may be that they feel comfortable enough with you to do so. They cannot safely express confusion or anger at the abusive parent.

This brainwashing of innocent and malleable children can be very difficult to fight. If it's happening to you, I encourage reading the books and articles cited in endnotes and under Resources. It's important to find attorneys and psychologists with knowledge about this as well.

Often children's behavior mimics the abusive parent. It is vital to respond as a parent rather than as if you're dealing with the abuser. Make it clear how they can express their

emotions appropriately. Open the door to hearing about what they are feeling. State your position without putting down the other parent. Avoid getting drawn into putting them in the middle. This is admittedly very difficult to navigate. Remind yourself that this isn't coming from them; they are being manipulated by their other parent. Being alienated from a parent is a grave injury for them.

Seek therapeutic help in how to best handle this challenging situation. Experts can assist in how to best respond to children's emotions and behaviors.

It hurts when children seem to reject or hate us. If this is happening, it is vital to find support from those who help you not take their behavior personally. Continuing to be a good parent is the best antidote we can supply.

Bricks Creating Self-doubt

Many of the other behavior bricks contribute to doubting ourselves. These behaviors do so directly by denying reality, twisting facts, and accusing falsely. Examples:

- Shifting responsibility for their behavior to you (e.g. wouldn't be unfaithful, drink, or abuse us if we didn't _____)
- Threatening suicide and saying we'd be responsible
- Blaming us for something we have no control over
- Accusing us of things we didn't do
- Claiming that abusive behavior only occurs with us so we must be the problem
- Insisting that something wasn't said or done that is factual
- Twisting what was said (e.g. when we complain about unfairness in work load, they accuse us of not wanting to contribute)
- saying what we say is crazy or doesn't make sense
- Insisting our memory is faulty
- Responding to our concerns with accusations regarding something unrelated
- Telling lies about what others have said
- Quoting the Bible or other authoritative sources to justify their abusive behavior
- Other:

Abusers engage in these behaviors with conviction that sounds convincing to us. The normal response is to take it seriously by looking for what we have missed, something that is a strength in healthy relationships.

The term "gaslight" was popularized by the 1944 movie of the same name. This form of emotional abuse confuses us with lies and questioning of our reality. We feel crazy, especially when there are also Negating, Devaluing, and Isolating tactics. We doubt ourselves because we don't believe someone who says they love us would behave like this.

In addition to eroding our confidence about what we know, they may damage others' opinions of us. This sometimes leads to people unwittingly colluding with our abusers because they can't see that reality is being twisted.

Bricks of Humiliation

Though all forms of abuse result in survivors feeling humiliated, this list includes behaviors whose primary intention is humiliation, such as:

- Having a verbal or physical altercation in public
- Telling others private information
- Making fun of us physically
- Comparing us to pornographic or sexually explicit pictures
- Telling derading jokes about us
- Deriding our decisions, opinions, or intelligence in front of others
- Insisting we dress in ways that make us feel uncomfortable
- Making sexual comments about us in front of others
- Staring at private part of the body
- Forcing us to do something that feels disgusting
- Other:

Feeling forced to submit undermines our self-respect, since we are prone to feel we should be able to stop or control it. When we are powerless to prevent this coercion, it brings feelings of shame.

When abusers make private matters a public spectacle, this adds to isolation and feeling trapped because we're embarrassed. We begin to think their behavior reflects on us and fear that others will think we deserve how we're treated. This inhibits us from reaching out for help, further narrowing our options.

Bricks of Intimidation

Controllers use actions or threats of actions to make it clear we are not safe. These include:

- Threatening to:
 - Disclose private matters or tell others lies
 - Kill or hurt us, someone else, or pets,
 - Use weapons

- Report you to authorities
- Force sex or seek sex with someone else
- Threatening to report to authorities fabricated accusations or twisted information, such as abuse of children or embezzlement of funds
- Throwing objects in our direction
- Body-checking (using their body to bump/shove/restrict our movements)
- Blocking the door from exiting or entering
- Making threatening gestures or facial expressions, such as clenched fists
- Screaming in our faces
- Standing too close
- Driving recklessly
- Destroying possessions
- Hurting or killing a pet
- Refusing to leave when asked
- Preventing or interrupting sleep
- Breaking important items of ours
- Sexual comments or harassment
- Other:

When there has been past physical abuse, threats are very effective because we know they are capable of it. Incidents of violence they have with others also increases the power of their threats.

Even when there hasn't been physical abuse, they often make it clear that we won't be safe if we don't submit to them.

Bricks of Physical Injury

Physical violence includes a broad range of behaviors that vary in severity of injury:

- Hitting you with objects
- Pulling hair
- Kicking
- Pushing and shoving
- Burning or cutting
- Tripping
- Slapping
- Hitting with a fist
- Beating

- Choking
- Using weapons
- Other:

It only takes one act of violence to alter how we respond to someone. These behaviors lead us to avoid displeasing coercive controllers, especially if we feel trapped and unable to leave.

Physical violence generally escalates over time. The behaviors that are life-threatening cause us to fear death, but all violence increases our fear that they will escalate to that level.

Non-physical controlling behaviors also escalate over time. They demoralize us. We often know that even when there has been no physical violence, there would be if the abuser feels threatened about losing control over us.

Statistics show that leaving is the most dangerous time. Sometimes controllers become physical only after we leave or make plans to divorce. Pay attention to your fear; you're the best person to know how much danger exists.

Bricks of Sexual Injury

Relationships that use sexual force pierce us with hurt, confusion, and disbelief. Besides rape, there are myriad ways that our sexuality can be violated. We have trouble making sense of how partners can abuse the love and trust we've placed in them when they:

- Grab private areas of the body
- Treat us as objects
- Stare suggestively at us
- Pressure to have sex in ways that are uncomfortable
- Use guilt to manipulate for sex
- Force sex with others
- Post sexual pictures of us without permission
- Use objects to hurt us sexually
- Rape
- Other:

Because our relationships include loving memories, many hesitate to call non-consensual sex “rape” and abusers reinforce this, claiming they're entitled. Their needs are always more important than yours. Being forced to be sexual and being treated as a sexual object to satisfy their appetites shuts off our normal receptivity and desire.

Everyone has a right to say no and to exercise control over their own bodies. If we can't say no—if we have no choice—there is no consent.

Rape deepens shame, helplessness, and hopelessness. Hopelessness may result in depression and suicidal ideation or acts. We also may find coping strategies to numb the pain, such as over-eating or alcohol/drug abuse or addiction.

Angela Browne in *When Battered Women Kill* says that women who experience sexual violence from their partners are statistically more likely to kill their abusers. Survivors resort to these acts when they perceive they're in mortal danger and nothing else will stop the abuse.

When we experience sexual harassment within our relationships, it dampens our usual receptivity to partners. This becomes a vicious circle when abusers blame us for our lack of interest. We may even blame ourselves when we haven't fully realized how the sexual intimidation affects us.

Pause for Breath

Notice how it felt to read through this checklist. We often feel fatigue or sick when we allow ourselves to fully see the extent of coercion we've experienced. Pause and take care of yourself. Below are some possibilities for reflection.

Reflections on Reading the Checklist

- Notice if you're minimizing your abuse. Focus on how you were affected rather than comparing with others.
- You may find it useful to write a letter you don't send expressing your feelings. Listening to ourselves can be healing, similar to having someone else hear and validate us. Putting it on paper or in print often helps us clarify what's happening. Be mindful of keeping it safe from other eyes.
- Do something that helps you to feel good. Walking or other exercise, artwork, listening to music, reading something inspirational, or any other activity that creates a sense of peace.
- Create an affirmation or use this one: "I am not responsible for how I've been treated. It is not a reflection on me but on the person who chose that behavior."