

DOMESTIC ABUSE RESOURCE

COERCIVE CONTROL

Coercive control is often easier to see as a pattern than as a single event. The question is not only “What happened?” but “What happens if this person says no?”

■ WHAT IT IS

Coercive control is a repeated pattern of domination that restricts another person’s freedom, independence and everyday choices. It can involve intimidation, monitoring, isolation, rules, punishment and other forms of abuse.

LOOK FOR THE PATTERN

The defining feature is the cumulative loss of freedom. Individual acts may look small from the outside, but together they can create an environment where one person continually adjusts their life to avoid consequences from the other.

■ THREE SIGNALS WORTH NOTICING

REPEATS

It keeps happening.

ESCALATES

The impact or consequences grow.

RESTRICTS

Freedom, safety or choice gets smaller.

A single incident can be confusing. Repetition, escalation and reduced freedom are often what make the wider pattern easier to see.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

One incident can be confusing. The pattern shows what life is becoming.

CONTINUE → WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

RECOGNIZE THE BEHAVIOR

WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

These examples are not a checklist or a diagnosis. The context matters: frequency, fear, consequences, escalation and whether one person is losing ordinary freedom or choice.

- Requiring permission, explanations or constant updates about ordinary activities.
- Controlling transport, work, money, sleep, food, medication or access to other people.
- Monitoring location, messages, spending, clothing, social media or who someone speaks to.
- Interrogating normal movements or accusing a partner of cheating without evidence.
- Creating rules that apply to one partner but not the other.
- Using children, pets, immigration status, private information or reputation as leverage.
- Using anger, withdrawal, threats or humiliation to punish independence.
- Making the person feel that the safest option is to anticipate and obey before being asked.

■ READ THE BEHAVIOR IN CONTEXT

ONE EVENT

Ask what happened in that moment and whether there was fear, force, pressure or intimidation.

THE PATTERN

Then ask what has been happening across weeks or months, especially when the other person resists or says no.

The useful question is not only “Did this happen?” It is “What does this behavior do to the other person over time?”

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Context matters. Notice what happens when a boundary is set.

CONTINUE → PATTERNS TO NOTICE

SEE THE WHOLE PICTURE

PATTERNS TO NOTICE

Patterns are often easier to recognize when you stop judging each incident separately. Look at what repeats, what escalates, what creates fear and what choices are gradually disappearing.



You make decisions based primarily on how the other person will react.



Friends, work, money, transport or privacy become harder to access over time.



Rules and expectations keep expanding while your independence keeps shrinking.



The person alternates control with affection, apologies or periods of calm.



You are monitored, questioned or punished for ordinary choices that used to be yours.



You feel as though you are constantly managing risk inside your own relationship.

■ WHY IT MATTERS

Coercive control can be profoundly damaging even when physical violence is absent or infrequent. It can isolate a person, undermine decision-making, create dependence and make leaving more complicated. Legal recognition of coercive control varies across U.S. states, so legal definitions should not be assumed to be the same everywhere.

MYTH

“They are just protective, jealous or very involved.”

REALITY

Care does not require another adult to surrender privacy, movement, relationships, money or the right to make everyday decisions.

Healthy relationships can include conflict, mistakes and disagreement. The concern is a repeated pattern that creates fear, removes autonomy or changes behavior through pressure or control.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Look at the pattern: what repeats, escalates or changes behavior?

CONTINUE → CASE STUDY & PRACTICAL STEPS

ANONYMOUS COMPOSITE EXAMPLE

CASE STUDY

This composite combines common patterns and is written to protect privacy. It is not presented as one identifiable person or investigation.

A person described the relationship as “mostly good” because their partner had never seriously assaulted them. Over time, though, their partner took over the finances, required location sharing, checked the person’s phone, criticized friends and questioned any delay in replying to messages. Going out alone was followed by an argument. Challenging a rule led to accusations of secrecy or disloyalty. None of the incidents seemed dramatic enough on their own, so they were repeatedly explained away. Eventually the person realized that clothes, routes, friendships and even grocery trips were being chosen around what would cause the least conflict.

■ WHAT TO NOTICE



The clearest sign is the shrinking of one partner’s ordinary independence rather than one dramatic incident.



Monitoring, financial control, isolation and punishment can work together as one system of control.



A useful question is whether choices are being made freely or primarily to avoid the other partner’s reaction.

■ IF THIS IS HAPPENING

- If safe, write down the rules, monitoring, punishments and restrictions you have noticed; patterns are often clearer on paper.
- Use a safer device or account if you believe your regular technology may be monitored.
- Reconnect carefully with at least one trusted person outside the relationship.
- Do not feel pressured to confront the person before you have considered how they may respond.
- A domestic violence professional can help you think through safety, practical barriers and local legal options without requiring you to make one particular choice.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

You do not need to explain away every incident before you are allowed to take a pattern seriously. Notice what repeats, what changes your behavior, and what happens when you set a boundary.