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## COERCIVE CONTROL CHECKLIST

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The Coercive Control Checklist<sup>1</sup> includes twelve types of behavior “bricks” that singly and together wall off our freedom. It includes examples from work and other settings to demonstrate that all types of relationships can contain beliefs in the right to be dominant.

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. Self-confidence, knowing our wants and needs, belief in our competence, and emotional stability are often eroded when we’re coercively controlled.

The list covers ten emotional and two physical consequences. The examples listed aren’t exhaustive so an “other” line is included for adding things you’ve experienced, and 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. Due to the frequency, context, and motivation, they gradually infringe on freedom. Conduct that seduces:

- Giving feedback that becomes intrusive because they want to be “helpful”
- Shopping so you “don’t have to go out”
- Discouraging efforts to work because “I’ll take care of you” or “Don’t you think I’m capable of supporting us?”
- Claiming they are jealous because “they love you”
- Calling constantly at work because of “worry” about you
- Picking out clothes and other possessions that “look good” on you
- Transporting you to work or other activities so that other men “don’t get the wrong ideas”

- Expecting you to spend all your time with them by saying “Don’t you love me?” or “Don’t you want to be with me?”
- Manipulating you 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”
- Other:

Seductive forms of control creep into a relationship and gradually escalate. The love and attachment we feel cause us initially to give them the benefit of the doubt. Others may also have difficulty identifying its inappropriateness. In addition, 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 so may not initially recognize what they’re doing.

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### **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:

- Limiting or preventing contact with family or friends
- Picking a fight when you are leaving for work or a leisure activity
- Accusing you of being unloving, selfish, or unfaithful when you see friends or family
- Claiming outside interests are evidence of disloyalty and lack of caring
- Preventing you from meeting work responsibilities, which leads to being disciplined or fired
- Interrogating you after you engage in activities about who you saw and what you did

- Fighting with you over social conversations because they say you're flirting
- Requiring you to ask permission before leaving
- Spreading lies that cause others to reject or shun you
- Telling you to stay away from people because they are not trustworthy
- Lying about what others say about you
- Monitoring your social media for posts they don't like
- Deleting friend contacts from your phone
- Other:

Technology unfortunately makes it easier for abusers to isolate us. Partners either force digital passwords from us or hack into our devices. Digital monitoring of our social media and smart phones results in making it harder to contact friends and family. Their intrusions into our privacy often result in increased abuse when they don't like what they see. We may stop using social media to avoid harassment, leading to further isolation.

We often give up our efforts to see others because of the price we pay, 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 our rights. We may say something like "*They hammer on me until I can't take it anymore and it's just easier to give in.*"

We have a chance to form our own perspective when we interact with friends, family, or co-workers. 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 control.

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### **Bricks of Devaluation**

Devaluation involves destructive criticism and belittling comments. Constructive feedback is reasonable and respectful; it gives us an opportunity to grow. Disparaging remarks attack our confidence, creating self-doubt and altering how we see ourselves. We become depreciated when we experience:

- Criticizing your physical or mental characteristics (you'll never get anywhere looking like that; you're not smart enough)
- Picking apart your accomplishments
- Correcting everything you say
- Couching compliments with criticism (this is the first good meal you've made)
- Name-calling
- Belittling you in front of friends and family or through social media
- Calling your personal wants or needs selfish
- Accusing you of being hysterical and out of control when you complain or try to discuss an issue
- Making fun of your opinions or spiritual beliefs
- Other:

Over time, devaluation increases our guardedness and can inhibit our receptivity to others' feedback. It may become difficult to accept constructive comments and even compliments. Devaluation affects our morale, even when we don't believe what is said. We may live with a sense of injustice and spend a lot of energy defending ourselves.

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### **Bricks of Negation**

Negation is the opposite of acknowledgement and acceptance. It results from having our perceptions, feelings, needs, and opinions denied 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 are not there
- Walking away when you're speaking
- Ignoring what you said
- Shaming you for what you believe
- Changing plans at the last minute so yours are disrupted
- Attributing your accomplishments to luck or to 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 this if we've received negating behavior during childhood because we began relationships with eroded confidence.

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### **Bricks of Neglect**

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

- Give silent treatment
- Withhold money
- Conceal information, preventing you from making plans (e.g. not telling you when the kids are being dropped off)
- Ignore requests
- Deny or restrict clothing, food, and other necessities
- Fail to give emotional support (e.g. when a parent dies)
- Disregard your accomplishments
- Promising to do something and then denying they did
- Prevent you from spending money or time on your interests
- Other:

These behaviors deepen the sense that we don't matter. Neglect may be the norm or it may be used to punish or reject whenever we do not bow to what they want.

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, such as other caring adults or therapy.

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### **Bricks of Betrayal**

Betrayal involves exploiting the trust and good will in an intimate relationship. By definition, intimacy involves vulnerability. 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 you don't give in to what they want
- Calling your needs selfish while claiming theirs as rights
- Using your confidences to ridicule or put you down later
- Lying to others about you
- Changing commitments or decisions that were agreed upon without your input
- Refusing to acknowledge concerns you voice
- Making decisions that affect both of you without your input
- Setting double standards for your behavior and theirs
- Breaking promises
- Requiring you to ask permission but doing what they want without considering you
- Withholding financial or other important information
- Creating separate financial accounts for joint money without your name
- Neglecting all responsibilities for the family
- Limiting spending on personal necessities because you don't make as much money
- Questioning all your expenditures but buying anything they want
- Refusing to contribute money for household expenses

- Insisting on actions that humiliate you
- Hacking into your social media or phone
- Using smart home appliances to harass you (change door-lock codes, thermostat, lights)
- Using social media to blame or accuse you
- Threatening to seek sex outside the relationship whenever you decline to be sexual
- Other:

The misuse of our vulnerability demonstrates a sense of entitlement and a willingness to exploit close relationships to gain unfair advantage. We will explore this further in “Why Do They Hurt Us?” chapters.

These behaviors violate our sense of fairness. We puzzle over why loved ones treat us like this and look for a reason. However, the deeper harm comes if we think something is wrong with us and we’re unlovable. Controllers of course encourage this.

Our beliefs about what is fair may differ, but we know when we’re not experiencing love. For instance, some people believe males are the head of the household and have the final say, but even so, they don’t condone disrespect and injustice. We experience betrayal and abuse whenever our cultural values of respect and justice are violated.

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### **Bricks of Alienation from Children**

“Parental alienation is a set of strategies that a parent uses to foster a child’s rejection of the other parent. Parental alienation syndrome develops in children who come to hate, fear, and reject the targeted parent as someone unworthy of having a relationship with them.” Dr. Amy J.L. Baker<sup>ii</sup>

These behaviors profoundly affect our well-being even though they are not directed immediately at us. We are powerfully bonded 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. In addition to the hurt we feel, we also ache for how it’s affecting our children.

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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 the child keep secrets from you
- Encouraging the child to use your first name instead of mom or dad
- Forcing the child to reject you or choose between you, threatening not to see child if doesn'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 themselves by telling children they aren't safe with you or to check with them before they do any activities
- 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 type of manipulation. Their dependence upon the abusive parent promotes their acceptance of what they are told. They can believe what is said and report it as their own opinion. Children often deny any good experiences or memories of the parent they have become alienated from. They also act out the alienation during visitation. Children act out their emotions, often not having the maturity to express them. The sole comfort is 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 end notes and under Resources. It's important to find attorneys and psychologists who are educated 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 clearly 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 assistance 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.

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### **Bricks Creating Self-doubt**

Behavior that refutes reality, twists facts, and accuses falsely creates self-doubt. The term "gaslight" was popularized by the 1944 movie of the same name. This form of emotional abuse causes us to question our reality. Shea Emma Fett<sup>iii</sup> says that gaslighting is a form of manipulation with the goal of changing who someone is, not just their behavior. We doubt our perceptions and feel crazy, especially when there are also Negating, Devaluing, and Isolating tactics.

Examples:

- Shifting responsibility for their behavior to you (e.g. would not be unfaithful, drink, abuse you if you did not \_\_\_\_\_)
- Threatening suicide and saying you'd be responsible
- Blaming you for something you have no control over
- Accusing you of things you do not do
- Claiming that abusive behavior only occurs with you so you're the problem
- Insisting something was not said or done, saying you imagine things
- Twisting what was said (e.g. when you complain about unfairness in work load, the person accuses you of not wanting to contribute)
- Acting like what you say does not make sense
- Insisting your memory is faulty
- Responding to your concerns with accusations regarding something unrelated
- Telling lies about what others have said
- Changing your passwords and then claiming you are losing your memory
- Blocking access to bank accounts because you can't manage money
- Quoting the Bible or other spiritual sources to justify their abusive behavior
- Other:

Abusers engage in these behaviors with conviction that sounds convincing to us. It's difficult to believe someone who says they love us would behave like this, and this is what coercive controllers play on. The normal response is to take it seriously by looking for what we have missed.

Fett<sup>iv</sup> identifies three stages of gaslighting. First, we know what they're saying is ridiculous and argue with them. Next, we consider their point of view and worry about what it

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means about us, and we also try to get them to see our viewpoint. Last, we consider what they say as normal and begin to lose the ability to trust our own judgments.

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 partners because they can't see how reality is being twisted.

The best way to respond is not to engage with these behaviors. We will examine how to do that in chapter 40.

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## **Bricks of Humiliation**

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

- Making fun of your body
- Comparing you to pornographic or sexually explicit pictures
- Telling derogatory jokes about you
- Having a verbal or physical altercation in public
- Telling others information meant to be private
- Deriding your decisions, opinions, or intelligence in front of others
- Insisting you dress in ways that make you feel uncomfortable
- Posting embarrassing things about you on social media, true or untrue
- Making crude sexual comments about you in private or in front of others
- Staring at private areas of your body
- Forcing you to do something that feels disgusting
- Other:

Being humiliated undermines our self-respect. We often feel we should be able to prevent it, and when we cannot, it brings a sense of shame. This especially cuts us coming from a partner.

When abusers make private matters a public spectacle, this is intended to shame and isolate us, increasing the sense of being trapped. We begin to think their behavior reflects on us

and fear that others think we deserve how we are treated. This inhibits us from reaching out for help, further narrowing our options.

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### **Bricks of Intimidation**

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

- Threatening to:
  - Make up offenses such as child abuse
  - Report you to authorities for immigration status
  - Disclose private matters or tell others lies
  - Kill or hurt you, someone else, or pets,
  - Use weapons
  - Force sex or seek sex with someone else
- Throwing objects in your direction
- Body-checking (using their body to bump/shove/restrict your movements)
- Blocking the door to keep you from exiting or entering
- Making threatening gestures or facial expressions, such as clenched fists
- Screaming in your face
- 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 yours
- Sexual comments or harassment
- Stalking
- Using smart phones or other electronic devices to track your activities
- Other:

Even when there has never been physical abuse, they often make it clear that we won't be safe if we don't give in. Intimidation works because it is natural to avoid anything that would hurt us. When there has been past physical abuse, threats are even more effective because there is a higher probability of it happening in the future. Incidents of violence with others also increase the power of intimidating behavior because they have proven they are capable of harmful acts.

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### **Bricks of Physical Injury**

Physical violence includes a broad range of behaviors that vary in seriousness. However, they all make it more likely we will give in. Examples:

- Hitting with objects
- Pulling hair
- Kicking
- Pushing and shoving
- Burning or cutting
- Tripping
- Slapping
- Hitting with a fist
- Beating
- Choking
- Using a knife, gun, or other weapons
- Other:

It only takes one act of violence to alter how we respond to that person forever. Regardless of how serious the injury, we will avoid displeasing them again, 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 it 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 by loss of control. 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.

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### **Bricks of Sexual Injury**

Relationships contaminated by sexual force pierce us to the core. Besides coercive sex, there are myriad ways that we 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
- Use guilt to manipulate for sex
- Treat you as a sex object instead of a loved one
- Compare you to pornography
- Pressure to have sex in ways you're not comfortable with
- Force sex with others
- Post sexual pictures of you without permission
- Use objects to hurt you sexually
- Rape you
- Other:

Because our relationships include loving memories, many hesitate to call non-consensual sex “rape” and abusers reinforce this, claiming it's our duty. They often guilt us by saying we don't love them or we're hurting them by not complying. Their needs are always more important than ours. Being forced to be sexual shuts off our 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.

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Sexual harassment 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 realized we're being abused.

When we are forced to have sex, it deepens our shame, helplessness, and hopelessness. These emotions can result in depression and sometimes thoughts of harming ourselves. We also may be more likely to seek coping strategies that numb our pain, such as over-eating or alcohol and drug abuse or addiction.

Angela Browne's research<sup>v</sup> documents that battered women who experience sexual violence from their partners are also statistically more likely to kill their abusers. Survivors resort to these acts when they feel hopeless and perceive that nothing else will stop the abuse.

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### **Reflections After Reading the Checklist**

- Notice how it felt to read this checklist. Many feel fatigued or queasy when they review the full extent of coercion they've experienced. Take care of yourself. Take whatever time you need before proceeding.
- Do some writing if that is helpful to you to explore your thoughts as well as your emotions. Talk to someone about them if that is better.
- Notice if you're comparing what happened and minimizing your abuse. Focus on how you were affected, rather than comparing stories. Think about the similarities in how everyone is touched by control.
- 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 we feel. Be mindful of keeping it safe from your partner's eyes. Password protect any documents you create and keep any journals in safe places, perhaps away from home.

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<sup>i</sup> I have drawn from the systems contributed by Schechter and Jones, Power and Control Wheel, and Chart of Coercion.

<sup>ii</sup> Dr. Amy J.L. Baker, “Parental Alienation Syndrome — The Parent/Child Disconnect” *Social Work Today* Vol. 8 No. 6 P. 26 (November/December 2008)

<sup>iii</sup> Shea Emma Fett, July 5, 2015 post on *Medium*: <https://medium.com/@sheaemmafett/10-things-i-wish-i-d-known-about-gaslighting-22234cb5e407>

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill* (London: The Free Press, 1987) pp. 128-136.