

Coercive Control in Intimate Relationships: A Practical Framework

Purpose of This Framework

This framework helps professionals recognize, document, and respond to coercive control in intimate relationships, even when physical violence is not present.

1. Definition of Coercive Control

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviors used to dominate, isolate, and entrap a partner. It often includes:

- Ongoing monitoring and surveillance
- Isolation from friends, family, and supports
- Control over money, transportation, work, or schooling
- Threats, intimidation, and degradation
- Sexual abuse
- Using children, immigration status, disability, or identity as leverage

2. Core Domains to Assess

Use these domains as a checklist when interviewing, reviewing records, or preparing reports:

1. Isolation & Restriction of Liberty

Limits on where the survivor can go, who they can see, or how they communicate

Rules about clothing, appearance, or religious practice

Confiscation of keys, IDs, phone, or transportation

2. Surveillance, Monitoring & Stalking Behaviors

Constant calls, texts, or demands for proof of location

Tracking devices, spyware, or control of online accounts

Showing up uninvited at work, school, or family events

3. Economic & Resource Control

Blocking access to bank accounts, paychecks, or benefits

Forcing the survivor to account for every dollar spent

Sabotaging employment or education

4. Psychological Degradation & Intimidation

Name-calling, humiliation, and gaslighting

Threats of self-harm, harm to the survivor, or harm to others

Destroying property or cherished items as a warning

5. Use of Children, Pets, or Vulnerabilities

Threatening to take the children, call CPS, or seek sole custody

Using immigration status, disability, or mental health history as a weapon

Harming or threatening pets or service animals

Practice Questions

Professionals can use questions like:

- “What rules does your partner have for you? What happens if you break them?”
- “How has your daily life changed since this relationship began?”
- “Are there places you’re not allowed to go or people you’re not allowed to see?”
- “Who controls the money, transportation, and important documents?”
- “What do you worry will happen if you say no or set a boundary?”

4. Indicators of High Risk

Pay special attention when you see:

- Escalating threats or stalking after separation
- Threats involving children, weapons, or suicide/homicide
- Attempts to manipulate courts, police, or systems to further control the survivor
- A long history of rule-setting, punishment, and surveillance

5. Documentation Tips

When documenting coercive control:

- Describe **patterns over time**, not just single incidents
- Use the survivor’s own words where possible
- Note how the behavior **limits freedom, safety, and choices**
- Connect behaviors to impacts on children, work, health, and daily life

6. Practice Considerations

- Believe survivors when they describe “walking on eggshells” or “never being allowed to relax”
- Avoid focusing only on physical injuries; ask about rules, punishments, and fear
- Consider cultural, economic, and systemic factors that may shape how control shows up

Conclusion

Coercive control is about domination, not conflict. This framework is designed to help professionals see the full pattern, name it clearly, and support safer, more informed decisions in advocacy, legal, and clinical settings.