

Professional Screening Checklist: Coercive Control & Narcissistic Abuse in Legal and Clinical Settings

Purpose: To distinguish between situational conflict (normal, albeit dysfunctional, relationship friction) and a systematic, unilateral campaign of domination known as Coercive Control (Evan Stark, 2007). This high level checklist emphasizes the **covert** tactics that often present as "he said/she said" scenarios or are misdiagnosed as "mutual abuse."

Part I: The Legal & Forensic Identification Checklist

(For Attorneys, Judges, and Custody Evaluators)

A. The "Credibility Paradox" and Presentation

The Charming Abuser: The alleged abuser presents as calm, rational, and likable, while the victim presents as erratic, emotional, or "hysterical." (Reference: *Bancroft & Silverman, The Batterer as Parent*)

Counter-Allegations/projection: The abuser has filed for custody or accused the victim of "parental alienation" immediately after the victim filed for protective orders or divorce (a common tactic of DARVO—Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender; Freyd, 1997).

Weaponized Therapy Language: The abuser uses clinical jargon ("boundaries," "triggered," "emotional dysregulation") to pathologize the victim's normal reactions to abuse.

B. Financial and Procedural Abuse (The "Paper Bullets")

Litigation Abuse: The abuser uses repeated frivolous motions, requests for continuances, and refusal to negotiate in good faith to deplete the victim's resources (Legal Bullying/Stalking).

Financial Starvation: Cutting off access to funds, hiding assets, or forcing the victim to account for every penny spent, creating dependency that traps them in the litigation.

Discovery as Harassment: Using the discovery process to demand invasive, irrelevant information (e.g., decades-old medical records) to intimidate the victim.

C. Parenting and Custody Dynamics

"Parental Alienation" Red Flags: Accusations of alienation are used as a counter argument to abuse concerns. (Reference: *Dallam & Silberg, 2016*).

Using the Child as a Weapon: The abuser interrogates the child about the victim's activities, demands the child report back, or uses visitation exchanges to create conflict and stress for the victim.

Neglect during Visitation: The abuser is hyper-focused on "winning" custody but demonstrates a lack of actual caregiving skills (e.g., ignoring medical needs, poor hygiene, leaving child with relatives while claiming victim denies access).

Part II: The Mental Health Practitioner's Identification Checklist

(For Therapists, Psychologists, and Psychiatrists)

A. Covert vs. Overt Aggression

Absence of Physical Violence: The practitioner recognizes that severe psychological harm occurs in the *absence* of physical assault. The "invisible bruises" of intimidation, isolation, and control are primary (Stark, 2007)

Gaslighting Indicators: The client reports feeling "crazy," doubting their memory, or relying on the abuser to define reality. The client may present with symptoms mimicking Borderline Personality Disorder or Generalized Anxiety, which are actually trauma responses (Complex PTSD; Herman, 1992).

B. The "Shared Psychosis" or Collateral Damage

The "Good Guy" Narrative: The practitioner feels an inexplicable urge to side with or like the charming partner during couples therapy, while feeling frustrated with the victim's "resistance." (Reference: *The Covert Passive-Aggressive Narcissist*; Mirza, 2017).

Manipulation of the Therapeutic Alliance: The abuser uses individual sessions to triangulate the therapist against the victim, reporting false emergencies or misquoting the therapist to the victim.

Couples Therapy Contraindication: The practitioner recognizes that Couples Therapy is dangerous and ineffective when coercive control is present, as the abuser will weaponize the "safe communication" tools taught in session.

C. Specific Covert Tactics Checklist

Covert Punishment: Silent treatment, sulking, and withdrawal of affection are used as punishment, but framed as "needing space" or "processing."

Baiting: The abuser provokes the victim into an emotional reaction (screaming, crying) in public or in front of the children, then points to that reaction as proof that the victim is unstable or abusive.

Intermittent Reinforcement: The abuser alternates cruelty with periodic kindness or "hoovering" (sucking the victim back in), creating a trauma bond (Stockholm Syndrome) that mimics addiction in the victim's neurology.

Part III: Common Pitfalls & Missed Signs by Professionals

1. **The "Mutual Abuse" Fallacy:** Treating a case as mutual combat when one party is using violence in self-defense or as a reaction to ongoing coercion (Reactive Abuse), while the other uses violence for control.
2. **The "Level Playing Field" Myth:** Assuming both parties have equal power in the divorce/custody process. The abuser often has financial and psychological control that makes "co-parenting" impossible.
3. **The Smiling Narcissist:** Judges and attorneys failing to recognize that a narcissist may actually seek 50/50 custody not because they want the child, but because it reduces child support payments and forces continued contact with the victim (Post-Separation Abuse).
4. **Misdiagnosis of the Victim:** Diagnosing the victim with Borderline Personality Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, or "Anxiety" without assessing for ongoing environmental stressors (the abuse). The symptoms often resolve when the abuse stops.
5. **The "Clean" Record:** Assuming that because the abuser has no criminal record or history of domestic violence calls, they are not abusive. Coercive controllers often live strictly within the bounds of the law while violating the victim's liberty.
6. **Technology and "Stalking by App":** Missing the significance of smart home devices, GPS tracking, or financial apps being used to monitor and intimidate the victim.
7. **The Smear Campaign:** Believing the abuser's campaign against the victim (trashing them to friends, family, school teachers, and the court) as an objective assessment of the victim's character, rather than recognizing it as a calculated isolation tactic.

Resources & Further Reading

For Legal Professionals:

- **"Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Custody Cases"** – by Lundy Bancroft.
- **"The Batterer as Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics"** – Lundy Bancroft & Jay Silverman.
- **"Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life"** – Evan Stark (The foundational text on coercive control law).
- **The Post-Separation Abuse Wheel** – Model developed by researchers to visualize ongoing control tactics post-divorce.

- **The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ)** – Resources on Domestic Violence and Child Custody.
- **"The Covert Passive-Aggressive Narcissist: Recognizing the Traits and Finding Healing After Hidden Emotional and Psychological Abuse"** – Debbie Mirza.
- **"Power: Surviving and Thriving After Narcissistic Abuse"** – Shahida Arabi.
- **"Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror"** – Judith Herman (for understanding Complex PTSD vs. Personality Disorders).
- **"The Body Keeps the Score"** – Bessel van der Kolk (for understanding the somatic impact of psychological abuse).
- **DARVO Research** – Jennifer J. Freyd, PhD (University of Oregon) on Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender.

Online & Organizational Tools:

- **The Duluth Model – Power and Control Wheel** (For baseline comparison against Coercive Control models).
- **One Mom's Battle (OMB)** – Resources for professionals on navigating high-conflict divorce and narcissistic personalities.
- **The Center for Coercive Control** – UK-based advocacy and policy resource.

Q&A Screening Checklist: Identifying Coercive Control & Narcissistic Abuse

Purpose: To guide professionals in asking targeted questions that reveal the presence of coercive control—especially covert patterns that are easily missed in standard assessments. This is a screening tool, not a diagnostic instrument. Red-flag answers should prompt further investigation by a specialist.

Section 1: Questions for the Alleged Victim / Client

A. Power and Control Dynamics

Q1: "When you and your partner disagree about something important (finances, parenting, social plans), how is the disagreement usually resolved?"

Why this matters: In a coercively controlling relationship, the abuser's preferences almost always prevail—not through negotiation, but through intimidation, sulking, or punishment. Look

for answers like “I just give in to keep the peace,” “He/she shuts down until I agree,” or “I’m afraid of the consequences if I don’t.” This reflects **unilateral decision-making** and fear (Stark, 2007).

Q2: “Does your partner monitor your whereabouts, communications, or spending? If so, how do they explain it?”

Red flags: “They say they just care about me,” “They check my phone to make sure I’m not cheating,” or “They get upset if I don’t answer immediately.” Covert abusers frame surveillance as concern, but it is **isolation and control** (Bancroft, 2002). Using tracking apps or demanding location sharing “for safety” is common.

Q3: “What happens when you try to spend time with friends or family without your partner?”

Red flags: “It’s not worth the fight,” “They make me feel guilty,” “They accuse me of choosing them over the relationship,” or “I’ve stopped seeing most people.” This indicates **social isolation**, a core element of coercive control (Stark, 2007).

Q4: “Has your partner ever done something that made you doubt your own memory or perception of events? Can you give an example?”

Why this matters: The hallmark of **gaslighting** is the victim’s chronic self-doubt. Answers like “I started recording conversations because I thought I was losing my mind” or “They tell me I said things I never said” are strong indicators (Stern, 2007). This is often missed because the victim may appear confused or “unreliable.”

Q5: “Do you feel like you have to walk on eggshells around your partner? What happens if you don’t?”

Red flags: “They give me the silent treatment for days,” “They slam doors or break things,” “They threaten to leave or take the kids,” or “They get this look that scares me.” Covert abuse often relies on **non-physical intimidation** that leaves no visible marks (Stark, 2007).

B. Financial and Litigation Abuse

Q6: “During the relationship, who controlled the money? How were financial decisions made?”

Red flags: “I had to ask for money for groceries,” “They hid accounts or lied about income,” “They made me account for every penny,” or “They ran up debt in my name.” **Economic abuse** is a powerful control tactic (Postmus et al., 2012). In divorce, look for sudden unemployment, hidden assets, or refusal to pay support as continuation of control.

Q7: “Since separation, has your ex used the legal system in a way that feels harassing or exhausting?”

Red flags: “They file motion after motion for no reason,” “They keep dragging me back to court over minor issues,” “They use custody exchanges to start arguments,” or “They threaten to take

the kids if I don't do what they want." This is **post-separation abuse** and litigation abuse (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

C. Parenting Dynamics

Q8: "How does your ex talk about you to the children? What do the children say about it?"

Red flags: "They tell the kids I'm crazy or don't love them," "The kids repeat things that sound like adult words," "They interrogate the kids after visits," or "They try to make the kids choose sides." This indicates **triangulation and emotional abuse of the child** (Dallam & Silberg, 2016).

Q9: "Has your ex ever threatened to take the children away, report you to CPS, or claim you are an unfit parent—especially when you tried to set boundaries?"

Why this matters: This is a classic **DARVO** tactic (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender) (Freyd, 1997). The abuser preemptively accuses the victim to deflect from their own behavior and gain leverage in custody disputes.

Section 2: Questions for the Alleged Abuser / Opposing Party

Note: In interviews or depositions, observe not only what is said but how it is said. Covert abusers often present as calm, cooperative, and reasonable—while subtly denigrating the other party.

Q10: "How would you describe the relationship? What do you think the main problems were?"

Red flags: They minimize their own behavior, blame the victim entirely, or use clinical jargon to pathologize the victim ("She's borderline," "He's a narcissist," "She needs help"). They may present themselves as the long-suffering victim of the other's emotional instability (Mirza, 2017).

Q11: "Can you tell me about a time when you lost your temper or did something you regret in the relationship?"

Why this matters: A coercive controller often cannot admit to any wrongdoing or will frame their actions as justified by the victim's behavior ("I only yelled because she provoked me"). This **lack of accountability** is a hallmark of narcissistic traits (Bancroft, 2002).

Q12: "What do you hope to achieve in this legal process? What do you think is fair?"

Red flags: Answers focused on "winning," "making her pay," or "getting what I deserve" rather than the best interests of the child. They may demand 50/50 custody not for the child's sake but to avoid child support or maintain control (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Q13: "How is your relationship with your children? What do you do together?"

Red flags: Vague or idealized answers ("We're very close," "They love me") with little concrete detail about daily caregiving, school, or medical needs. They may see children as extensions of themselves rather than individuals (Dallam & Silberg, 2016).

Section 3: Questions for the Professional (Self-Reflection)

These are questions you should ask yourself during and after an assessment to avoid common pitfalls.

Q14: “Am I finding one party more likable or credible based on their presentation rather than the facts?”

Why this matters: Covert abusers are often charming and socially skilled. Victims may appear anxious, defensive, or inconsistent due to trauma (Herman, 1992). If you feel an inexplicable pull to side with one party, that may be a manipulation tactic (Bancroft, 2002).

Q15: “Am I treating this as a ‘mutual abuse’ case because both parties admit to some conflict?”

Red flag: If one party’s actions are primarily **reactive** to ongoing control (e.g., yelling back, throwing something in frustration) while the other party’s actions are systematic and purposeful, it is not mutual abuse. Distinguish between **situational couple violence** and **coercive control** (Johnson, 2008).

Q16: “Have I considered that the absence of physical violence does not mean the absence of abuse?”

Why this matters: Many professionals dismiss coercive control because “he never hit her.” Psychological abuse, isolation, and financial control cause severe harm and are often more predictive of ongoing risk than physical violence alone (Stark, 2007).

Q17: “Am I relying on the abuser’s clean public record as evidence of good character?”

Red flag: Coercive controllers are often pillars of the community. They keep their abuse private. The victim’s word may be the only evidence, and victims are often not believed because they seem “hysterical” while the abuser seems calm (Bancroft, 2002).

Q18: “Am I interpreting the victim’s resistance to co-parenting as ‘parental alienation’ without examining why they are resistant?”

Why this matters: True parental alienation is rare. More often, a protective parent’s concerns are based on real abuse or neglect. Accusations of alienation by an abuser are a common tactic to silence the victim and gain custody (Dallam & Silberg, 2016).

Section 4: Quick Reference – “Red Flag” Answer Key

Question Focus	Red Flag Answer	Indicator
Conflict resolution	“I always give in to keep peace.”	Unilateral control, fear
Monitoring	“They check my phone to make sure I’m safe.”	Surveillance disguised as
Social isolation	“It’s not worth the fight to see friends.”	Coercive control
Gaslighting	“I started recording conversations because I thought I was crazy.”	Psychological manipulation
Eggshells	“They give me the silent treatment for days.”	Covert punishment
Finances	“I had to ask for money for groceries.”	Economic abuse
Litigation	“They file motions just to harass me.”	Post-separation abuse
Parenting	“They tell the kids I’m crazy.”	Triangulation, emotional a
Self-reflection	“I find the abuser more credible because they’re calm.”	Bias toward abuser’s presentation

Resources for Professionals

- **Bancroft, L., & Silverman, J. G. (2002).** *The Batterer as Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics*. Sage Publications.
- **Stark, E. (2007).** *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. Oxford University Press.
- **Herman, J. L. (1992).** *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books.
- **Freyd, J. J. (1997).** *Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness, and Betrayal Trauma Theory*. *Feminism & Psychology*, 7(1), 22-32. (For DARVO)

- **Dallam, S. J., & Silberg, J. L. (2016).** *Recommended treatments for children exposed to intimate partner violence: A critical review of the literature.* Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma, 9(3), 207-221.
- **Johnson, M. P. (2008).** *A Typology of Domestic Violence: Intimate Terrorism, Violent Resistance, and Situational Couple Violence.* Northeastern University Press.
- **Mirza, D. (2017).** *The Covert Passive-Aggressive Narcissist: Recognizing the Traits and Finding Healing After Hidden Emotional and Psychological Abuse.* Independently published.
- **Postmus, J. L., Plummer, S. B., McMahon, S., Murshid, N. S., & Kim, M. S. (2012).** *Understanding economic abuse in the lives of survivors.* Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 27(3), 411-430.
- **Stern, R. (2007).** *The Gaslight Effect: How to Spot and Survive the Hidden Manipulation Others Use to Control Your Life.* Harmony Books.

Online Tools:

- **The Center for Coercive Control** – www.centerforcoercivecontrol.org
- **One Mom's Battle** – www.onemomsbattle.com (Resources for professionals on high-conflict divorce and narcissistic abuse)
- **The Duluth Model** – www.theduluthmodel.org (Power and Control Wheel, post-separation wheel)