

Survivor Safety Guide for Coercive Control

Recognizing Coercive Control

Coercive control is a pattern of behavior that frightens, isolates, or controls you. It often begins slowly, hidden behind affection or concern. The absence of bruises does not mean the absence of danger.

Coercive control can include:

- Telling you what you can and cannot do
- Controlling your money or access to essentials
- Monitoring your phone, messages, or location
- Criticizing, blaming, or humiliating you
- Isolating you from friends, family, or support
- Creating fear, guilt, or self-doubt
- Threatening you, your children, or your pets
- Punishing you for breaking "rules"
- Explosive anger that makes you change your behavior

Signs you might notice in yourself:

- Feeling nervous or scared around them
- Adjusting your behavior to avoid anger or punishment
- Seeing friends and family less than you used to
- Needing permission to make simple decisions
- Questioning your own memory or feelings
- Feeling responsible for their emotions
- Feeling watched or having no privacy
- Feeling criticized, belittled, or humiliated

None of these feelings are your fault. They are common responses to controlling behavior.

Why Leaving Can Be Dangerous

Coercive control does not necessarily stop when you leave. Many survivors are subjected to persistent post-separation abuse over significant periods. Studies suggest that stalking intensity and frequency often increase during separation.

Leaving is a process, not a single event. Safety planning is not a one-off crisis response—it is a continuous, trauma-informed intervention.

Important Warning: Many Professionals Do Not Understand Coercive Control

This is one of the most important things you need to know:

Many therapists, counselors, lawyers, judges, mediators, and other professionals are not trained to recognize coercive control or covert abuse. Their training is often focused on physical violence, mental health diagnoses, or what they can see in a short session. Coercive control is designed to be invisible. It happens in private. It is subtle. It is often disguised as caring, concern, or "just trying to keep the family together."

You may encounter professionals who:

- Tell you "it's not that bad" because there are no bruises
- Blame you for the conflict or suggest you are "overreacting"
- Push for co-parenting or family therapy, not understanding that this puts you in further danger
- Try to "fix" the relationship rather than helping you get out
- Fail to recognize the pattern of isolation, control, and fear
- Suggest you need to "try harder" or "communicate better"
- Tell you that you are being "high-conflict" or "difficult"
- Do not understand that the abuse often gets worse after you leave

You are not crazy. You are not overreacting. You are not the problem.

The problem is that many systems are not yet equipped to see what you are living through. Coercive control works precisely because it is hard to see and hard to prove. It thrives in the gaps between what is visible and what is happening behind closed doors.

We Are Here to Help You Illustrate the Pattern

Because so many professionals do not understand coercive control, you may need help showing them the full picture.

This is what we do. We help you:

- See the pattern clearly for yourself—so you stop blaming yourself
- Document what is happening in a way that professionals can understand
- Show the pattern of behavior over time, not just individual incidents
- Find professionals who are trained in coercive control
- Prepare for conversations with lawyers, therapists, and courts
- Refuse to accept responses that blame you or minimize the abuse

You do not need to have all the words or know how to explain it perfectly. We can help you pull together what is happening so you can say:

"This is not just an argument. This is a pattern. Here is how it works. Here is what they do. Here is what it has done to me and my children."

What we can help you illustrate:

- The pattern of isolation (who you have lost contact with)
- The pattern of control (what you are not allowed to do)
- The pattern of fear (how you have to walk on eggshells)
- The pattern of manipulation (how they twist things to make you doubt yourself)
- The pattern of escalation (how it has gotten worse over time)
- The impact on your children (what they have seen, heard, or experienced)

When you see the pattern yourself, it is harder for anyone to tell you it is not real.

The Danger of Inadequate Response

When a professional does not understand coercive control, the consequences can be severe:

- **You may be sent home to a dangerous situation** because the professional believes the physical risk is low
- **You may be blamed for the abuse** or told you are equally responsible
- **Your children may be placed in danger** because the professional does not see the risk
- **You may be pressured to reconcile** with the abuser
- **You may lose custody** because the professional believes the abuser's version of events
- **You may be diagnosed incorrectly** and given treatment that does not address the actual problem

- **You may internalize the professional's invalidation** and believe you really are the problem

This is not your failure. This is a system failure. These professionals are not bad people—they are often untrained. But their lack of training can harm you.

How We Can Help

- **We listen** without judgment
- **We believe you**
- **We know what coercive control looks like**
- **We can help you put words to what is happening**
- **We can help you document the pattern**
- **We can connect you to professionals who are trained**
- **We can support you through the process of leaving and rebuilding**

Safety Planning: Before You Leave

Document the Abuse (Only If Safe)

If it is safe to do so, keep a diary of incidents. Include dates, times, what happened, and any witnesses. Encourage survivors to report all incidents to the police or other organizations that will record and keep accurate records.

Prepare an Emergency Bag

Pack essentials you can grab quickly:

- Important documents (IDs, birth certificates, passports)
- Bank cards, cash, and checkbooks
- Medication and prescriptions
- Keys (house, car, safety deposit box)
- Change of clothes for you and children
- Phone charger
- Address book with contacts

Identify Safe Places

Know where you can go:

- A trusted friend or family member's home
- A domestic violence shelter
- A hotel or motel
- A public place (hospital, police station, library)

Plan with Children

- Talk to children about safety in age-appropriate ways
- Establish a code word so children know when to call for help
- Plan how to get children out safely
- Identify who will pick them up from school if needed

Technology Safety

Abusers often use technology to monitor and control. Consider these steps:

- Check your phone for tracking apps or spyware
- Change passwords on all accounts (email, social media, banking)
- Turn off location sharing on phones and apps
- Be careful with social media—status updates and geolocation tags can reveal your location
- Use a friend's phone or a public computer for sensitive searches
- Consider getting a separate, prepaid phone

Safe Communication

- Establish how you can be contacted safely
- If the abuser does not know where you live or work, keep those locations confidential
- Use an Address Confidentiality Program if available in your state—these provide a substitute mailing address for survivors

Financial Safety

Financial abuse is present in approximately 99% of domestic violence cases.

- Open a bank account in your name only (use a different bank)
- Have mail sent to a PO Box or trusted address
- Gather financial documents (tax returns, bank statements, mortgage/lease papers)
- Understand your financial situation—what you own, owe, and earn
- If you pursue child support, consider using the Department of Child Support to collect on your behalf (e.g., by garnishing wages) to reduce direct contact

Legal Protection

Protective Orders

- Seek professional advice about criminal or civil law provisions, such as restraining or non-molestation orders
- Do not put your actual address on court forms—use the Address Confidentiality Program or a confidential address form when possible
- Redact your address and place of employment from documents you submit to the court

Court Safety Considerations

- Let court staff know you have safety concerns
- Request separate waiting areas or staggered scheduling
- Bring a support person
- If you have a protective order, keep it with you at all times
- In high-risk cases, ask the court to refer your case to a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) or equivalent risk assessment team

When You Have Left

Stay Safe

- Change your routine—take different routes to work, shop at different times
- Inform trusted neighbors, employers, and school staff about the situation
- Keep a charged phone with you at all times
- Have a "safe word" with trusted people to signal danger
- Consider changing your phone number

Protect Your Children

- Ensure any child contact arrangements are safe and supervised if needed
- Make sure schools know who is authorized to pick up your children
- Provide schools with copies of any protective orders
- Watch for signs that the abuser is using the children to gather information about you

Emotional Safety

- Connect with domestic violence support services
- Seek trauma-informed therapy
- Join a support group
- Trust your instincts—if something feels wrong, it probably is

If You Are Supporting Someone Else

- Listen without judgment
- Let them know they are not to blame
- Respect their decisions—even if you disagree
- Help them find resources
- Never confront the abuser directly
- Do not share what they tell you without their permission

Remember:

- You are not to blame for someone else's abuse
- Confusion and self-doubt are normal reactions to coercive control
- You do not need to make any big decisions today; noticing and reading about this is an important first step
- You deserve support, no matter how unclear things feel right now
- If a professional does not understand coercive control, that is their limitation, not your failure
- We are here to help you illustrate the pattern and find the right support

Emergency Support

United States

- **National Domestic Violence Hotline:** 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE) | Text "START" to 88788
- **RAINN (Sexual Assault):** 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)
- **Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline:** 1-800-422-4453

International

- **UK National Domestic Abuse Helpline:** 0808 2000 247
- **Australia 1800RESPECT:** 1800 737 732 (24/7)
- **Canada:** Provincial/Territorial crisis lines available

In an emergency, call 911 (or local emergency number) immediately.