

SEX RELATIONSHIPS

## Is your friend in a relationship ruled by coercive control? Here's how to help

'Control in any type of relationship is unacceptable.'

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'Control in any type of relationship is unacceptable.' Image: iStock Source:BodyAndSoul

**Domestic abuse isn't always physical violence, coercive control is just one of the ways it manifests.**

We each have the right to live in a safe and free environment – control in any type of relationship is unacceptable.

However, it's not always easily recognised – and it often gets worse over time. So what can we do if we've noticed that a family member or friend is acting differently and suspect that their partner is controlling or abusing them?

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## Coercive control and domestic violence

Domestic abuse isn't always physical violence. Coercive control is when any person that you have a personal relationship with behaves repeatedly in a way that makes you feel controlled, dependent, scared or isolated.

Many people, particularly women, can live in a toxic and abusive relationship for years – decades even – and not realise they're experiencing abuse. The truth is, coercive control often has us second-guessing ourselves and our decisions alike.

Amanda\*, was married to her second husband for more than 20 years and shared two children. She never suffered physical abuse, but she was living a life under the control of her husband. "The kids and I were walking on eggshells went he got home from work to avoid fights," she recalls. "I was happy to let him take control of the finances in the early years as I was busy bringing up two kids, but as our marriage went on, I realised he was controlling every dollar and how it was spent."

"He didn't want me involved or to know our financial situation, but if I went to Woolworths just for groceries, he'd know every little detail about what I bought and when. He was tracking my moves, but there was also gaslighting – I started to question myself and I felt very isolated."



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Amanda, like many others being controlled by their partner, eventually began experiencing anxiety and depression, and needed help to rebuild her life and independence.

Survivors of coercive control often talk of unfathomable cruelty and violence, and orchestrated campaigns of control when they look back on their partner's behaviour. But many are afraid to speak up, frightened by potentially setting off their partner.

They may reach out to a family member or friend for help and support even before calling the police. Other times, we may notice that our loved one no longer shows up to social events, isn't quite themselves, or perhaps they seem fearful of going home.



It's a tough situation to find ourselves in. Few of us know what to say or how to act as a source of support for our loved one, but we do have an unique opportunity to become an ally and that can make all the difference. Here's how:

## 1. Offer support and show up

Partners who control their partners often isolate the person from family and friends, ban them from seeing certain people or set time limits when they're out with friends.

Social isolation has been linked to mental illness and emotional distress, so it's important to regularly pick up the phone or organise a catch-up to provide support and listen. Ask questions such as: 'does that make you afraid when...'? You can follow up with: 'that must be incredibly difficult when...'



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## 2. Help build their self-confidence

Anyone who has witnessed or experienced abuse, violence or control in their household understands how it can impact a person's mental health and erode self-worth. Often the perpetrator will degrade the person through language.

They may make disparaging comments about your loved one's figure and appearance (in private or in public) or control how they dress or style their hair. It's important to counteract these negative comments and tell your family member or friend about all of their good characteristics and traits.

## 3. Ensure they have financial support

Research shows that women in particular are more likely to experience financial abuse, and 98 per cent of women who report physical and sexual violence also suffer from financial abuse.

It can be incredibly isolating and make seeking help and safety extremely difficult. The abuser may stop your loved one from working, control how they spend their money or limit access to money.

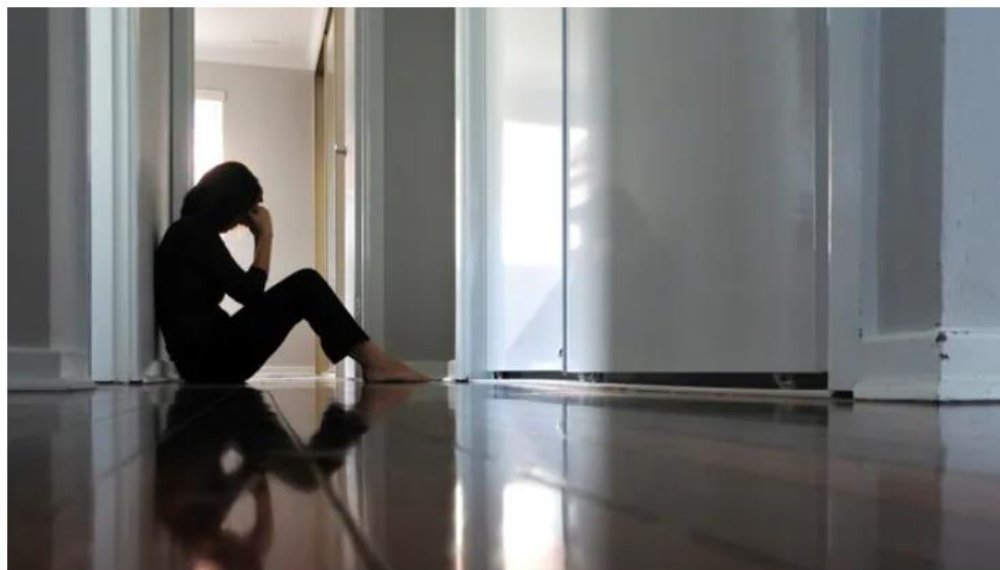


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#### 4. Point them to seek help

There are a range of organisations and treatment centres that can help people escape safely and deal with the emotional trauma of coercive control. However, it can be difficult to encourage someone to seek help especially if they still have a deep love for the perpetrator or abuser. They may also struggle to admit that their partner has gained control over them.

It's also important to note that post-separation, the situation may escalate and become incredibly dangerous for the victim and their loved ones, especially children, as we've seen in many high-profile domestic violence cases. This is because the perpetrator feels like they're losing control over their partner.

Reaching out for help can give your friend or family member a safe space, but don't assume that they will no longer require your support. In fact, this is usually the time that they will need your support more than ever as they resolve their trauma and rebuild their life.

*Diane Young is a trauma specialist and therapist at [South Pacific Private](#), Australia's leading treatment centre for trauma, addiction and mental health conditions. Diane has completed postgraduate training in Holistic Counselling and Psychotherapy.*

*To reach out for help in ending a domestic violence situation or to seek support for yourself or others in dealing with the trauma or coercive control, you can contact:*

- Call 1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732
- Call Lifeline on 13 11 14
- Call MensLine Australia on 1300 789 978
- Call South Pacific Private on (02) 9905 3667