



Exploring Coercive Control: Recognizing Signs and Resources Available



This resource provides information to Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members and families to help recognize and understand different forms of family violence and intimate partner violence.

Exploring this topic can be highly sensitive and may evoke a range of emotions in some individuals. If you find yourself needing support, assistance is available to you 24/7 through the Family Information Line (English and French, free, confidential):

North America: 1-800-866-4546

International: 00-800-771-17722

Email: FIL-LIF@cfmws.com

If you are in immediate danger, contact 911 in Canada or your local authorities for OUTCAN.

Exploring coercive control:

Coercive control is a continuous pattern of controlling, intimidating, and threatening behaviour towards another person. The aim of coercive control is to hold power over the survivor, control them, and keep them dependent on the person causing harm. Someone using coercive control tactics may use multiple forms of abuse to control the other person. This can make it harder for the survivor to leave the unsafe relationship. Coercive control includes actions like:

- Controlling aspects of someone's everyday life, such as where they can go, or who they can talk to;
- Deliberately isolating someone from their family and friends or work/education;
- Controlling the household finances and making important financial decisions without the partner;

- Monitoring someone’s location or online activity, or constantly checking in with them through texts/calls; or
- Any sort of threatening behaviour – for example, threatening to reveal personal information about someone or harm their pet if orders are not obeyed.

Someone who experiences coercive control may also experience physical or sexual abuse; however coercive control can also happen without any physical violence, often making it harder to recognize. Coercive control does not have to include physical or sexual violence to be serious or harmful. You have a right to feel safe in your relationships.

Why coercive control can be hard to recognize:

Coercive control is a silent form of abuse that often takes place behind closed doors. To the outside world the person causing harm may look like a caring partner or a pillar of the community. However, in the home they may be controlling, demanding, or even violent. Survivors may live in constant fear of making mistakes or upsetting their partner. They may feel like they need to ask permission for even the most basic things.

Coercive control usually happens over the course of many years. This can make it especially hard to recognize as it can begin in small ways that gradually escalate over time. A person causing harm may begin to test their partner’s boundaries with small, reasonable-sounding requests that become bigger and less reasonable over time.

Coercive control can also happen early in relationships. Someone may use a tactic like love bombing – engaging in over-the-top behaviours and gestures disguised as romantic interest, such as buying another person expensive gifts early in the relationship or constantly texting/phoning another person to the point where it feels overbearing. If questioned, the person love bombing will often claim they are behaving this way because they are in love. However, this behaviour is usually manipulative as they are trying to force someone into a relationship or make the other person feel indebted to them.

Another early warning sign may be someone trying to pressure their partner into making major life changes, such as moving in together, getting married, or pregnant early in the relationship. Only you can decide what behaviours you are comfortable with in your relationships.

Gaslighting:

Gaslighting is a form of coercive control. Gaslighting occurs when someone continually undermines and distorts their partner’s version of events. They may do this by questioning facts, denying memories, and pressuring the survivor into accepting the partner’s version of reality. Some examples of gaslighting could be someone constantly telling their partner: “that never happened” or “you’re being too sensitive/emotional.” Typically, this happens slowly over the span of weeks or months and can be hard to recognize. This can cause the survivor to question themselves and feel like they can’t trust their own judgement. The person experiencing this abuse may begin to feel that they are losing their grasp on reality and this can lead them to depend on the person causing harm even more.

Who is most at risk?

Coercive control affects people of all genders, ages, sexual orientations, and backgrounds. However, women are more likely to experience coercive control and intimate partner violence, especially 2SLGBTQI+ women, Indigenous and racialized women, women with disabilities, and women living in rural or remote communities. This is especially important because those who cause harm often use coercive control tactics to target an individual’s vulnerabilities. For example, someone living in a rural community has less access to resources and is generally more isolated than someone living in a city – a person using coercive control may use this vulnerability to cause harm.

Military lifestyle:

In the military context, coercive control might look like someone restricting their partner's access to shared bank accounts every time the CAF member leaves for a deployment or tasking, or someone installing hidden cameras in their house to spy on their partner while they are deployed. Another example would be someone repeatedly pressuring their partner into not using birth control to ensure their partner becomes pregnant and comes with them to their next relocation or posting (one way to keep the partner under their control). Remember, these are only a couple of examples and coercive control may look different in your relationship.

Understanding the impact of coercive control:

Since the aim of coercive control is to diminish the survivor's independence and make them reliant on their partner, many survivors find it difficult to leave an unsafe relationship. Someone experiencing coercive control may be financially dependent on their partner, as they may have been pressured into giving up their job or prevented from completing their education which can affect their job prospects.

While coercive control can occur within a relationship, it can also continue after a relationship has ended. For example, someone may harass or stalk an ex-partner, they may destroy an ex-partner's property, or they may withhold mandated payments to their ex-partner.

Some forms of coercive control such as pressuring a partner not to use contraception can result in unplanned pregnancies. If someone has a child, it can make it more complicated to leave an unsafe relationship.

Seeking support:

Experiencing coercive control, or any type of abuse, can be a vulnerable and scary experience, and you deserve to feel safe, respected, and supported in your relationships. Know that support is available. If you are experiencing coercive control, you don't have to make big decisions right away. Starting small, such as having one conversation, can help too.

Steps you can take to get support:

- Talk to a trusted friend, family member, or Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) or Military Family Services (MFS) staff.
- Call the Family Information Line (FIL) for confidential support.
- Contact the Canadian Forces Member Assistance Program (CFMAP) for 24/7 telephone counselling.
- Reach out to local crisis services or shelters.
- Explore safety planning options with a trained professional or check out our "Creating a Safety Plan" tip sheet.



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