

The toll of control

While it may not leave any visible marks, coercive control is a form of domestic violence. Know the signs.

Domestic violence has many faces. The physical signs are easy to spot – the broken bones, the bruising. But what about the partner who constantly sends messages to check in on a woman's whereabouts? Or who constantly belittles their partner in front of other people? Who discourages a woman from seeing her friends or family, gradually isolating her? Who uses verbal abuse, fear or financial power to control a woman?

These are just some examples of coercion, or coercive control – patterns of behaviours that are designed to manipulate and control a relationship. And while they can often be harder to see than a bruise or broken bone, they can be just as damaging and just as dangerous as any physical injury. And, sadly, far too common.

However, learning the signs of coercion can be the first step towards seeking advice and regaining control. We spoke to Jean Hailes psychologist Gillian Needleman about what coercion is, and how women can seek help.

Coercion is common

One in four women in Australia has experienced emotional or psychological abuse, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. In the Jean Hailes 2020 National Women's Health Survey, 11.1% of all women surveyed reported having a controlling partner. However the figure was much higher for women with disabilities, at almost 19%, and even higher for LGBTIQ respondents, at 20.2%.

A COVID-fuelled increase

The level of abuse rose during the pandemic. A recent online survey of 15,000 women in Australia revealed high levels of self-reported domestic violence among women during COVID-19. In the three months prior to the survey – done during May 2020 – 4.2% of women had experienced physical violence from a partner they lived with, 2.2% had experienced sexual violence, and 5.8% had experienced coercive control.

Nearly half of the women experiencing coercive control reported an increase in emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours.

Although there are exceptions, it is usually men who use coercive controlling behaviours. They use intimidation, degradation and isolation to control the lives and movements of their partners. They may also limit their access to money, subject them to sexual and/or verbal abuse, and regulate their lives. They may even dictate how a woman will eat, sleep, clean and dress.

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GILLIAN NEEDLEMAN, JEAN HAILES PSYCHOLOGIST

“Rots you from the inside”

The toll of coercion on a woman, emotionally and physically, can be devastating. She exists in a world of fear that many survivors have described as forever walking on eggshells. It can happen to women of all ages and backgrounds.

“The abuse is so toxic that it rots you from the

inside,” says Jean Hailes psychologist Gillian Needleman.

“It attacks the very essence of a woman. The damage it causes to her core self is terrible.”

The control can be both subtle and sinister. “If someone is micromanaging you or your movements, if you are being monitored, if you are being gaslit, it unplugs you from your sense of what is going on,” explains Ms Needleman. “You will lose your confidence and your identity.

Being gaslit, known as gaslighting, is a form of psychological abuse where a woman might be left to question her sanity or her grip on reality. For example, a partner will knowingly contradict something previously said in a conversation, insisting that a woman has misheard or mistaken what was actually said.

“You will lose a sense of trust in your own judgement.”

“Women are good at adjusting, at pleasing, but ultimately they reach a point where they have lost their freedom and are living with constant anxiety and stress.”

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The power of hindsight

In her practice, Ms Needleman says she has listened to the stories from women who have only understood the stresses and strains they lived under in hindsight – after they had separated from their partners. During the time of the abuse, their sole focus was on survival, on fulfilling the demands of the abuser in order to keep the peace or, at the very least, to limit the conflict.

“It takes a while to realise intuitively that it’s wrong,” says Ms Needleman. “You don’t have access to finances, you may feel isolated, you feel there’s a sense that if you don’t do ‘x’, they will do ‘y’.

“Women are good at adjusting, at pleasing, but ultimately they reach a point where they have lost their freedom and are living with constant anxiety and stress.”

Deciding to leave

The decision to leave the abusive relationship can be terrifying. This is because so many of these women have been isolated from family and friends. Some do not even identify as victims of domestic violence. But they do feel shame because of the sort of relationship they find themselves in. Ironically, that shame sometimes stops them from looking for help.

“It’s scary to leave because there is toxic bonding with the perpetrator,” explains Ms Needleman.

It is important not to shame or judge these vulnerable women. After what is often years of being subjected to years of coercive controlling behaviours, their ability to make decisions, to trust their judgements has been compromised. It stops them from walking out the door. If there are children involved, the decision is made even more difficult.

Ms Needleman says the women leave the relationships when they are ready to do so.

Getting help

If a woman is feeling uncomfortable in her relationship, it can be helpful to talk to a GP and ask to see a psychologist, says Ms Needleman. “You don’t need to be ready to leave to have a question,” she says. “Is my relationship healthy or abusive? Even posing the question means you need to seek advice.”

For more information, go to www.1800respect.org.au

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