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What is Coercive Control?

Coercive control is a term developed by Evan Stark to help us understand domestic abuse as more than a “fight”. It is a pattern of behaviour which seeks to take away the victim’s liberty or freedom, to strip away their sense of self; it is not just bodily integrity which is violated but also human rights.

www.cedarnetwork.org.uk

What is Coercive Control?

We traditionally think of domestic abuse and/or violence as physical, an incident or series of incidents of physical violence perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner and indeed this is often true but coercive control is much more than a “fight” between two individuals.

Coercive control is a crime of liberty, freedom and human rights and now a crime in law under the Serious Crime Act 2015 Section 76 (see below for more information). Indeed violence is a part of the act (or behaviours) but there is not always violence. If violence is at all part of the abuse it can be a small part and hidden, both behind closed doors and on parts of the body covered by clothing, this in order to *save face* and reputation of the perpetrator. You will often hear victims comment that the emotional, verbal, mental, financial and sexual abuse left deeper scars than any *punch* could ever do.

The rules are based on the perpetrators stereotypical and self-centered views of how his/her partner should act or behave towards him/her. Rules about how he/she cooks, keeps house, mothers/fathers, dresses, speaks, laughs, eats, socialises and performs sexually. The perpetrator will isolate, degrade and micro-manage every aspect of the victims daily life. He/she will play mind games, monitoring phone calls, text messages, friendships and work. The perpetrator creates a world where the victim's every move is constantly checked, watched and monitored against an ever changing non-existent book of rules that change hourly (or even every minute) and are unpredictable and threatening. The perpetrators watchful eye and micro-management will continue from a afar by constant and persistent phone calls, texts, emails, harassment and stalking. It can seem as if the perpetrator is omnipotent!

The basis of coercive control is fear and confusion which are central to this insidious behaviour and crime. The victim lives in a world of *moving of goal posts* and *shifting of the earth beneath their feet* every minute of every day. Walking on eggshells around their abuser, the victim is constantly living in a confused state or fog, just existing, in a world filled with terror and fear. Eventually, the victim suffers low self-esteem and confidence and can become severely depressed. During recovery a victim can suffer post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Coercive control is not just domestic, it does not just occur in the home, it can cross social spaces through technology, social media and through surveillance that can spy, track, watch and follow the victim throughout their daily life, tracking their car, texts and emails. The victim becomes brainwashed and adapts they’re own behaviour to accommodate the perpetrator in order to

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endeavour to keep the peace. A victim lives with this day and night and has huge strength of courage to survive the ever changing goal posts and rules.

There is also another form of coercive control whereby the perpetrator behaves in such a way that he/she causes the victim to feel insecure and unloved. The perpetrator can regularly "flirt" and meet with others both physically and online, to make his/her victim feel jealous and then accuse the victim of imagining this situation, being paranoid and jealous. This is reverse psychology – the perpetrator makes the victim the problem due to the perpetrators negative, unsavory and unhealthy behaviours.

Experiencing coercive control is like being taken hostage; the victim becomes captive in an unreal world created by the partner/abuser, entrapped in a world of confusion, contradiction and fear.

A survivor's voice...

"He raped me on numerous occasions forcing me to have sex because he needed it and held me down even through my tears. He ensured the act was completed on his terms, in his time frame and satisfying his own desires. He was demanding, kinky and rough and did not stop when asked. He showed no compassion for me even when I suffered gynecological problems and had no empathy or sympathy and was still extremely demanding and rough sexually. When he was particularly vile he with-held affection and used affection and sex it to blackmail me. He definitely got a kick out of degrading me and enjoyed his power of force; power and force in the bedroom definitely turned him on.

This sick man criticised every move and action I made; he was never satisfied with anything I did or owned. Nothing was ever right and he was never thankful or grateful. He controlled, isolated, threatened, terrorised, insulted, humiliated and belittled me. He told me I was crazy, a head case, got a screw loose, stupid, dishonest, a liar, psychotic, paranoid, mentally unstable, should be locked up, put away and that I had a personality disorder. He criticised my cooking, house-keeping, what I wore and how I spoke. He told me I was thick and stupid on numerous occasions. After all this he would say he was sorry and it wouldn't happen again. Told me he loved me and couldn't live without me. Next day it started all over again.

I lived in a fog and was deeply depressed; I suffered anxiety, panic attacks and PTSD. I walked around like a zombie. I became a symptomatic alcoholic. I was terrified of my abuser and tried always to keep the peace. He was violent in the home, breaking items and throwing things.

These types of abusers confuse their victims so badly that the victim eventually believes the propaganda being thrown at them. You feel dirty, humiliated and disgusted with yourself. The abuser tells you over and over that you are crazy and paranoid. Mine often said I had a personality disorder and behind my back and unbeknown to me he wrote to my GP stating this. He damaged my whole being with his mouth, mind and fists."

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Coercive control does not discriminate it can happen to anyone regardless of gender, age, race, faith, colour, culture and social standing. You can be subjected to coercive control. Some of you reading this may recognise the signs and symptoms. If you are being abused or know someone who is please be sensitive and compassionate, most of all believe and ask what, if anything you can do to help.

If someone is in immediate danger call 999

To report a crime call 101

See Factsheets 129 and 130 for Further Information

Coercive Control Law

The purpose of this guidance is to address controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship which causes someone to fear that violence will be used against them on at least two occasions; or causes them serious alarm or distress which has a substantial adverse effect on their usual day-to-day activities.

Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse: psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional.

Resources & Further Information:

Serious Crime Act 2015 - Section 76 Statutory Guidance Document here:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482528/Controlling_or_coercive_behaviour_-_statutory_guidance.pdf

Serious Crime Act 2015 - Section 76 - legislation here:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/9/section/76/enacted>

Books:

Coercive Control by Evan Stark

Women at Risk by Evan Stark

Without Conscience by Robert D. Hare