



Coercive Control is a Crime



What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse on a person by a current or former intimate partner or family member. It is essentially a pattern of behaviour which is characterised by the exercise of control and the misuse of power by one person over another. It is usually frequent and persistent. The abuse can be physical and non – physical, including psychological, emotional, virtual, verbal, sexual and/or financial.

What is coercive control?

Domestic abuse isn't always physical. Coercive control is at the heart of domestic abuse. It is a pattern of controlling behaviours and acts which may include threats, humiliation and intimidation, assaults or other abuse, that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim (*Women's Aid NI*).

This controlling behaviour is designed to make a person dependent on their abuser by isolating them from family, friends, and support services, exploiting them, humiliating and degrading them and regulating their everyday behaviour. It can be a gradual process which over time can lead to a total loss of confidence and sense of self.

Watch this short animation for more information: *Coercive Control - Where is the line?*

<https://signhealth.org.uk/videos/coercive-control-where-is-the-line/#:~:text=Coercive%20Control%20%E2%80%93%20Where%20is%20the%20line%3F%20Coercive,and%20independence%2C%20creating%20isolation%20and%20barriers%20to%20support>

Created by Ards and North Down PCSP, North Down and Ards Women's Aid, South Eastern Sexual and Domestic Violence Partnership and Neep Pictures. SignHealth worked with Aimee Campbell-Nottage to translate the video into British Sign Language (BSL).

Examples of coercive behaviour

- Love bombing e.g. being showered with gifts and compliments, wanting the person's undivided attention, calling and texting frequently, or getting upset when boundaries and limits are put up. Abusers lavish the person with attention or affection, in order to influence or manipulate them.
- Gaslighting e.g. lying to the person, discrediting them, minimizing their thoughts and feelings, shifting the blame or an abuser retelling stories/events in ways that are in their favour.
- Isolating from friends and family
- Depriving basic needs
- Monitoring the person's time
- Monitoring via online communication tools or spyware



Coercive Control is a Crime



- Taking control over aspects of everyday life, such as where the person can go, who they can see, what they can wear and when they can sleep
- Depriving access to support services
- Repeated put downs, humiliating, degrading or dehumanising the person
- Controlling finances
- Threats and intimidation.

Who does domestic abuse affect?

Domestic abuse occurs right across society, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnic or religious group, sexual orientation, wealth, disability or geography. It can include violence by a son, daughter, mother, father, husband, wife, life partner or any other person who has a close relationship with the victim.

Children and young people can be victims of domestic abuse - the child/young person can see/hear the abuse; be present during the abuse; be used to abuse another person, or the abuse can be directed (or threatened to be) directed at them. *'Often the biggest victims of domestic abuse are the smallest.'* (Women's Aid NI)

The Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) statistics each year show increasing levels of domestic abuse ever recorded with police responding, on average, to a domestic abuse incident every 17 minutes of every day. The majority of victims are women and children although research is highlighting the prevalence and context of male victims. It is estimated that 1 in 4 women will suffer domestic abuse at some point in their lives. 1 in 4 lesbian and bi women and 4 in 10 gay and bi men are thought to have experienced domestic abuse. 80% of trans people are thought to have experienced domestic abuse from a partner or ex-partner. However, it remains a hidden crime, surrounded by stigmas and is significantly underreported.

What are the signs and impact of domestic abuse?

Physical signs may include bruising or injuries, or the covering up of injuries, and pain. Behavioural signs may include a change in personality or mood; constantly checking in with or desperate to please their partner; constant worrying about how their partner will react; never having money; or skipping work or social occasions.

Research has shown that domestic abuse causes lasting damage to a victim's physical and mental health, affecting all areas of their lives, including work, relationships, social life, confidence and self-esteem. Recovering from the impact of domestic abuse is a process, which can be a long and painful journey.



Coercive Control is a Crime



Children witnessing domestic abuse may become anxious or depressed, have difficulty sleeping, have nightmares or flashbacks, may complain of physical symptoms such as tummy aches, may start to wet their bed, or may become withdrawn. Older children may begin to play truant, start to use alcohol or drugs, begin to self-harm or develop an eating disorder.

Growing up in an environment where domestic abuse occurs is likely to be a traumatic, stressful and harmful experience - an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). ACEs can create levels of stress that are dangerous to the child's brain development, behaviour, health and learning, and adversely affect their future adult lives. Read our ACEs factsheet <https://www.volunteernow.co.uk/publications/adverse-childhood-experiences-factsheet/>

The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (NI) 2021

Why the need for new legislation?

- To help support victims of crime
 - criminalise psychological abuse of a partner, ex-partner or family member
 - recognise the repetitive nature of domestic violence and abuse
 - reflect the victim's and survivor's experience.
- To fill gaps in current legislation with new offences.
- To achieve better sentencing of suspects and fulfil the goal set out by several NI agencies - to have a society in Northern Ireland in which domestic and sexual violence is not tolerated in any form, have effective tailored preventative and responsive services, all victims are supported, and perpetrators are held to account.
- To protect all those affected by domestic abuse including children.

Key aspects of the new offence

A person commits an offence if all the following FOUR conditions are met:

1. Offender engages in a course of behaviour which is abusive of another person (on two or more occasions)
2. The offender and victim are personally connected to each other at the time.
3. A reasonable person would consider the course of behaviour would be likely to cause the victim physical or psychological harm; this includes fear, alarm and distress.
4. They intend the course of behaviour to cause the victim to suffer physical or psychological harm, or is reckless as to whether the course of behaviour causes the victim to suffer physical or psychological harm.



Coercive Control is a Crime



'Abusive behaviour' captures not just physical and sexual violence, but also coercive control. The behaviour can either be to intentionally cause harm, or be reckless as to whether or not it would cause harm. Harm doesn't have to be caused for the offence to apply.

The new offence criminalises patterns of abusive behaviour - there needs to be two incidents of abuse or more for it to apply. However, a one off incident can still be an offence.

There may be an enhanced (aggravated) sentence where the victim is a young person, or where children and young people have been involved in the abuse or present during the abuse. Abusive behaviour of a young person aged 16 or 17 by their parent is also covered by the domestic abuse offence.

Report your concerns and access support

If you are concerned that a child/adult you are working with may be experiencing domestic abuse, check out your concerns with them, and report as per your organisation's reporting procedures. See below for useful contacts to display, and share with those availing of your services:

PSNI - Dial 999 for emergency. If you can't speak, press 55 to let police know it is an emergency. Otherwise phone 101 to report. You can call Crimestoppers confidentially on 0800 555 111.
<https://www.psni.police.uk/crime/domestic-abuse/>

Nexus NI provides the confidential Domestic and Sexual Violence helpline 0808 802 1414, offering support, advice and referral for all victims of domestic and sexual abuse in NI. This free service is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
<https://nexusni.org/>

Women's Aid offer a range of specialist services to women, children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse. Contact numbers and confidential webchat can be accessed at
<https://www.womensaidni.org/>

The Men's Advice Line is a confidential helpline for male victims of domestic abuse and those supporting them. Call 0808 801 0327 or visit
<https://mensadviceline.org.uk/>

The Respect Phonenumber provides support and help for anyone worried about hurting their loved ones. This is an anonymous and confidential helpline for men and women who are harming their partners and families. Call 0808 802 4040 or visit <https://respectphonenumber.org.uk/>

NSPCC Helpline can provide confidential advice and guidance if you are worried about a child. Call 0808 800 5000 or visit
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>



Coercive Control is a Crime

More resources to share with your team:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVtxxZ94Lg0> Female victim and male perpetrator
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IV_eI8ivxdM Male victim and female perpetrator, with children
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CXTHeCWRd0> Victim - mother and perpetrator - son
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWNYjwFR_n8 Older female victim and perpetrator - husband
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5z7iTuQETM> Male victim and male perpetrator
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhteDv4o6oA> Young female victim and young male perpetrator
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLIXXt6WNsM> Evan Stark : Domestic terrorism
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MpFOgp3nQ4> Wakefield Council : Coercive control
- <https://www.womensaidni.org/get-help/safety-planning/>
- <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/the-survivors-handbook/>