



Coercive control and the law

It is a criminal offence in England and Wales for someone to subject you to coercive control. We talk more about what coercive control means below. If you experience this kind of abuse you can report it to the police. You may also be able to apply to the Family Court for protection. This legal guide is designed to give you information about the ways in which the law can protect you.

What is coercive control?

Coercive control is when a person you are **personally connected** to repeatedly behaves in a way which makes you feel controlled, dependent, isolated or scared.

The following types of behaviour are just some examples of coercive control:

- isolating you from your friends and family
- controlling how much money you have and how you spend it
- monitoring your activities and your movements
- repeatedly putting you down, calling you names or telling you that you are worthless
- threatening to harm or kill you or your child
- threatening to publish information about you or to report you to the police or the authorities
- damaging your property or household goods
- forcing you to take part in criminal activity or child abuse

Some of the behaviours in this list can be other offences as well as coercive control, so the abuser can be arrested for more than one offence for the same behaviour. For example, if the abuser broke your phone as part of his coercive control then he could be arrested and charged for coercive control and also the offence of criminal damage.

The abuser will be guilty of the offence of coercive control if:

- a. he is **personally connected** to you, and
- b. his behaviour has had a **serious effect** on you, and
- c. the abuser knew or ought to have known that his behaviour would have a serious effect on you.

What does serious effect mean?

The abuser's behaviour is considered to have a serious effect on you if:

- on at least two occasions you have feared that violence will be used against you, **or**
- you have felt serious alarm or distress and it has had a substantial effect on your usual day to day activities.

The behaviour has had a substantial effect on you if it has caused you to change the way you live. For example, you may have changed the way you socialise, your physical or mental health may have deteriorated, you may have changed the way you do household chores or how you care for your children. If you have changed the way you live in order to keep you or your children safe from harm, it is possible that the behaviour you are experiencing is coercive control.

How will the court decide whether my abuser knew or ought to have known that his behaviour would have a serious effect on me?

The court will decide based on whether a reasonable person who had all the information the abuser had would have known that the behaviour would have a serious effect on you.

Are we personally connected?

Only someone who is personally connected to you can commit an offence of coercive control. You are personally connected to the abuser if you:

- are or have been married to each other
- are or have been civil partners of each other
- are or have been engaged to marry one another
- have entered into a civil partnership agreement
- are or have been in an intimate relationship with one another
- have each had a parental relationship in relation to the same child
- are relatives

A relative includes parents, stepparents, grandparents, sons, daughters, stepchildren, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, and first cousins. A relative can also be a person who your spouse, civil partner or cohabiting partner is related to, for example, your husband's parents.

A new law came into force on 5 April 2023. This new law removed the previous requirement that the victim and suspect had to be cohabiting (living together) when the behaviour occurred. Behaviour that occurs before 5 April 2023 which involves partners, ex-partners, and family members who are **not** living together cannot be coercive and controlling behaviour, but it may be another offence.

If you are not personally connected to the abuser because he is, for example, a colleague, a neighbour, an acquaintance or someone you don't know you may still be able to seek protection from the abuse under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. See our legal guide [Harassment and the law](#).

In an emergency

In an emergency you can contact the police for assistance by dialling 999. You can also text phone 18000, or text 999 if you have pre-registered with the [emergency text service](#). The police may be able to attend the scene of the incident to protect you from further abuse and to arrest the abuser (see [Reporting an offence to the police: a guide to criminal investigations](#)). For other support see Useful contacts at the end of this guide.

If it is not an emergency then you can contact the police by going to your local police station, or calling your local police station by dialling 101.



Reporting coercive control to the police

Coercive control is a criminal offence. If you experience this form of abuse you can report it to the police. The police may give the abuser a warning or they may arrest him for a criminal offence. If the police have enough evidence they will refer the matter to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The CPS can start criminal proceedings against the abuser. If he is found guilty of an offence he can be sentenced up to 5 years in prison or made to pay a fine or both.

The court may also make a restraining order to protect you as part of the criminal proceedings. The court can make restraining orders even if the abuser is acquitted or not convicted of the crime. A restraining order is a court order which prohibits the abuser from doing certain things such as contacting you or attending your place of work or home address. Breaching or breaking a restraining order is a criminal offence. For more information on the criminal justice process see our legal guides [Reporting an offence to the police: A guide to criminal investigations](#) and [From charge to trial: A guide to criminal proceedings](#).

Coercive control can involve a range of other criminal offences including assault, rape, threats to kill, burglary and criminal damage. Coercive control is a criminal offence even if you have not experienced any physical violence or damage to your property. You can report everything that has happened to the police and the police will identify which criminal offences may have been committed. If you have experienced a violent crime you may be entitled to criminal injuries compensation. For more details see [A guide to criminal injuries compensation](#). You can also contact our legal [advice line](#), please see Useful contacts for details.

Evidence of coercive control

It is the job of the police to investigate any reports of coercive control and gather evidence. You may be able to help the police by providing copies of emails, text messages or voicemail recordings, photographs of injuries or damage to property. You may be able to evidence financial abuse by showing your bank statements or you may have kept a diary of your day to day experiences. You may be able to show that you have lost contact with friends and family members, left your employment or withdrawn from clubs and other activities. Your medical records may show that the abuser accompanies you to appointments. It is common for abusers to



make or threaten to make false allegations about their victims to the police, social services and immigration authorities or to friends and family. These threats are part of the coercive control and you can also report these threats to the police.

You can report the coercive control to the police even if you don't have any other evidence. Your statement is evidence in the case.

If you are helping the police to gather evidence it is important that you discuss whether this is safe. Remember that it is the police's job to investigate and gather evidence and they should not be expecting you to do something that the police should be doing, or anything that puts you in danger.

If you have concerns about the way the police have responded to your report then you can contact our legal [advice line](#), see [Useful contacts](#) for details.

Coercive control that happened before 29th December 2015

The offence of coercive control came into force on 29th December 2015. It only applies to behaviour that happened after 29th December 2015.

If the abuser started the abuse before 29th December 2015 and the behaviour continued after that date then he could be charged for the behaviour after 29th December 2015. He cannot be charged for the behaviour before 29th December 2015, but it can support the case against him.

Protection from the Family Court: domestic violence injunctions

If you are **associated** to the abuser you may also wish to apply to the Family Court for a domestic violence injunction to protect you from further abuse or to exclude the abuser from your home. You can apply to the Family Court for a domestic violence injunction, whether or not you choose to report the abuse to the police.

You are associated to the abuser if you:

- are or were ever married, engaged or in a civil partnership
- are or were living together (including as flatmates, partners, relations)
- are relatives, including: parents, children, grandparents, grandchildren, siblings, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews or first cousins (whether by blood, marriage, civil partnership or cohabitation)
- have a child together or have or had parental responsibility for the same child
- are or were in an intimate personal relationship of significant duration

For more information see our legal guide [Domestic violence injunctions](#).



The law is complex and may have changed since this guide was produced. This guide is designed to provide general information only for the law in England and Wales. You should seek up-to-date, independent legal advice. Rights of Women does not accept responsibility for any reliance placed on the legal information contained in this guide.

Rights of Women's advice lines

For free, confidential, legal advice on criminal law matters call **020 7251 8887**.

We have two family law advice lines, one national and one for women in London.

Women living or working in London: **call 020 7608 1137**
For all women: call **020 7251 6577**

For a full list of Rights of Women's legal guides and information about our advice lines go to

www.rightsofwomen.org.uk

Useful contacts

Emergency Contacts	For help to apply for a non-molestation order
Police (emergency) 999	CourtNav www.courtnav.org.uk
24 hour domestic violence helpline 0808 2000 247 www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk	Find a lawyer
National LGBT Domestic Abuse Helpline 0300 999 5428 or 0800 999 5428	The Law Society 0207 320 5650 www.lawsociety.org.uk/find-a-solicitor
National Stalking Helpline 0808 802 0300 http://www.stalkinghelpline.org/faq/about-the-law/	Ministry of Justice 020 3334 3555 www.find-legal-advice.justice.gov.uk
Revenge Porn Helpline 0845 6000 459 www.revengepornhelpline.org.uk/	Resolution (to find a family law specialist lawyer) 020 3841 0300 www.resolution.org.uk
Stop Online Abuse www.stoponlineabuse.org.uk	Public Access Portal www.directaccessportal.co.uk