

# Controlling Behavior: 14 Signs and How to Respond

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Medically reviewed by [Aleesha Grier, PsyD](#)

## Table of Contents

[Definition](#)

[Signs of Control](#)

[Signs of Abuse](#)

[Causes](#)

[Coping](#)

Controlling behavior happens when someone asserts control over another person through manipulation. Someone's intimidating, overbearing, and authoritarian behavior can make you feel angry or embarrassed or even create feelings of inferiority. It can and often does become abusive, especially when it makes you feel afraid or intimidated.

Relationships with controlling people can be challenging. Improving your personal boundaries and keeping supportive people close by can help. Learn to strengthen your boundaries and talk to a therapist if you can.



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## What Is Controlling Behavior?

Controlling behavior occurs when a person attempts to conform another person to their own needs or desires through some form of manipulation. This outsized desire for control is unhealthy, unhelpful, and may create relationship conflicts, but it's not always abusive.

Controlling behavior becomes abusive when it is coercive (threatening). This behavior includes ongoing degradation and threats that can lead to [domestic violence](#). Multiple studies have shown that controlling behavior is associated with a higher likelihood of physical aggression or abuse. <sup>[1]</sup>

## Signs of Controlling Behavior

Controlling people don't always employ the same tactics, but some common behaviors can point to a controlling personality. Here are some examples of controlling behavior. <sup>[2][3]</sup>

### It's Their Way or the Highway

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suggestions or points of view.

A controlling person might get angry when you say "no" and will often go to great lengths to get you to change your mind, including making it seem like you don't have the option to refuse their demands.

## **They Want to Be the Center of Attention**

They have a strong need to be the center of attention and have the focus on them. Often, when controlling people ask about your life, they will quickly redirect the conversation back to themselves. For example, if you don't feel well or are having a bad day, they may say they feel worse or their day was more difficult than yours.

## **They Are Always Criticizing You**

They may be highly critical of your actions and feel there is a "right" or better way to do things. In their mind, this can be a way of helping you improve. It may include subtle remarks or interrupting you to point out small criticisms of your words or actions.

For example, if you have an accomplishment, they may comment on how you could have done things better, or they may congratulate you but then make a dig or joke at your expense.

## **They Keep You Away From Friends and Loved Ones**

A controlling person may seem unreasonably jealous about the other people in your life, even close family members and other platonic relationships.

They may constantly ask where you've been or who you're planning to see or become upset when you spend time with someone else. They may even try to prevent you from seeing your friends or family.

## **They Blame Others**

Controlling people feel that nothing is their fault. They will use a technique known as projection to shift the blame back to you. They may even accuse you of things they have done themselves so they can't be blamed.

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[Manipulation](#) is one of the key components of controlling people because manipulating others gives them a sense of power and control.

## **They Gaslight You**

Gaslighting is a form of manipulation where a person tries to convince you that you're overreacting or imagining problems that aren't there.

A person may even try to convince you that you're crazy to avoid taking responsibility for certain actions. When this happens often, it might cause you to doubt your memory or judgment.

## **They Don't Respect Boundaries**

Controlling people typically do not respect another person's [boundaries](#). In healthy relationships, boundaries between two people are respected and valued. For the controlling person, a boundary is a hindrance to their need for control.

## **They Try to Make You Feel Guilty**

Controlling people may guilt you into doing what they want. For example, they may cause you to feel guilty for how you spend your time, such as with friends instead of with them.

## **They're Unpredictable**

They can go from being happy to quickly getting irritated, moody, and sulking, especially if they can't get their way.

## **They Excuse Their Behavior as "Just Joking"**

They may subtly make fun of you or put you down, and when you question the comment, they say they are "just joking," or they will accuse you of not being able to take a joke. This is different from playful banter, as it has an edge to it and makes the other person feel ridiculed and uncomfortable.

## **They Keep Score**

They typically keep a mental scorecard. If they have done something for you, you'll be reminded and they may use guilt to get what they want

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## They Try to Change You

A controlling person might tell you how to dress or criticize your appearance. They may ridicule your interests and try to convince you to adopt their own interests. They might even hide or throw away things that are important to you, such as hobby supplies or a favorite piece of clothing.

## They Use Intimidation

Intimidation can take several different forms. Someone who talks down to you in front of others is using a form of intimidation. Threats—both violent and non-violent—are another form of intimidation. The person may threaten to expose a secret, for example, or leave with your children. They may also threaten to hurt you or someone you care about.

## Signs of Abuse

Relationship abuse is about gaining power and control over another person. But just because someone is controlling doesn't mean they are [abusive](#).

Controlling behavior crosses the line into abuse when it results in the other person feeling afraid and intimidated. However, it is not always easy to identify specific actions as abuse. You may excuse a partner's behavior or feel that you are overreacting.

In general, [abuse escalates over time](#). Identifying certain behaviors early gives you a better chance of exiting a relationship safely. <sup>[4]</sup>

Does your partner:

Embarrass or ridicule you in front of others?

Cause you to question your decisions?

Use intimidation or threats to force you to do things?

Physically mistreat you (e.g., grab, push, pinch, or hit)?

Repeatedly call, text, or email to check up on you or show up to confirm your location?

Use drugs or alcohol as an excuse for their behavior?

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Prevent you from doing things you want to do (e.g., spending time with friends or family)?

Physically prevent you from leaving your home?

Do you:

Feel afraid of how your partner will act?

Make excuses to other people for your partner's behavior?

Believe that changing aspects of your conduct can change or fix your partner's behavior?

Try not to cause conflict or anger your partner?

Always do what your partner wants instead of what you want?

Stay with your partner because you are afraid of what might happen if you break up?

If even one or two of these behaviors is happening in your relationship, talk to someone you trust.

## Resources to Get Help

If you have experienced threats, intimidation, isolation, or ridicule from your partner, you may be experiencing abuse. You can contact the following places for help, resources, and information:

**National Domestic Violence Hotline:** Available 24/7. Call 800-799-SAFE (7233), text "START" to 88788, or chat live online at [thehotline.org](https://thehotline.org).

**Love Is Respect:** Advocates for young adult relationships. Available 24/7 by phoning 866-331-9474, texting "LOVEIS" to 22522, or live chatting online at [loveisrespect.org](https://loveisrespect.org).

## Causes

Control is a basic social need. It provides a sense of predictability, stability, and order. In some people, this need for control becomes unhealthy.

Insecurity and [anxiety](#) can lead to controlling behavior. Instead of using healthy coping skills, controlling people want to control the world around

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Often, controlling behavior is the result of a mental condition that causes a person to have abnormal social expectations.

An [anxiety disorder](#), for example, may lead to controlling behavior. A person with a personality disorder such as narcissistic personality disorder lacks empathy for other people, which can also lead to controlling behavior. <sup>[5]</sup> Individuals with codependent personality disorder often struggle with making decisions on their own and feeling helpless, which can also lead to controlling behaviors.

People may also exhibit controlling behavior because of an inflated sense of responsibility towards others.

## Managing Controlling Behavior

People with controlling behaviors can be challenging to deal with. It may be exhausting and at times overwhelming. In these cases, self-care and support are vital to your well-being.

Here are some ways to cope with the controlling people in your life:

**Support and connection:** Reach out more frequently to those in your support network. It's important to have supportive relationships in which others can affirm and validate your reality, feelings, and perceptions.

**[Therapy](#):** Working with a mental health professional can help you gain healthy coping skills to handle the people with controlling behaviors in your life.

**[Yoga](#) and [exercise](#):** Stress often gets stored in the body as tension. Yoga and exercise can help release the tension in your body, which can reduce your stress levels.

**[Progressive relaxation](#):** Another way to calm your nervous system and reduce tension in the body is to try progressive muscle relaxation. There are guided meditations for this online that will walk you through consciously relaxing your muscles.

**[Strengthen your boundaries](#):** Learn ways to confidently say no and set firm boundaries.

## Dealing With a Controlling Partner

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done, they may project it back onto you.

It can be hard not to lose yourself and your sense of reality in these types of relationships when control is your partner's goal and they are not concerned with what is in your best interest.

Controlling behaviors in a relationship may include dialogue like:

"I was just joking. You're too sensitive. Can't you take a joke?"

"I didn't mean it. I don't know why you have to start a fight when everything is fine."

"Why did you turn and go that way? I told you to go the other way."

**Ways to respond:** Regardless of how the controlling partner behaves, you may need to find ways to push back respectfully. Here are a few tips:

**Keep calm:** The less reactive you are, the better. It's their choice to yell, stomp, and sulk. You can choose to stay cool.

**Use "I" statements:** "I" statements involve speaking from your point of view only. For example, instead of saying, "You never listen to anyone, and you're not listening to me now" rephrase to "I feel that my concerns are not being heard." Starting sentences with "You never" or "When you" will only put the other person on the defensive. <sup>[6]</sup>

**Take your time:** Protect yourself by asking for more time. You can say something like, "I need to think about that. I'll get back to you later."

## When You're the Controlling Person

If you are a controlling person, awareness is the first step. We can't change what we don't even see. Here are some suggestions on how to improve:

**Adopt healthy coping skills:** You may have learned growing up that you couldn't count on anyone but yourself, so you learned to cope the best you knew how. Those coping skills that once worked can negatively impact your adult relationships. Working with a mental health professional can help you learn healthy coping methods.

**Soften your tone:** You may be used to being blunt and giving commands. Think of ways to soften your tone to make others more comfortable.

**Seek first to understand:** Practice truly listening to what others are saying. You may be operating with assumptions about what is best for them, but



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understand.

**Give a sincere apology:** No one is perfect, and we all have areas of growth we need to work on. Sincerely acknowledging your mistakes can go a long way toward repairing and healing your relationships. Prove you're sorry by doing the work to change your behavior.

## Summary

Controlling people attempt to assert power and control over others through manipulative tactics such as blaming, being critical, and shutting others down. They may not be aware they are exhibiting this behavior, which often stems from their own anxiety.

You can cope with controlling people by setting boundaries, being clear, and using "I" statements. If you are a controlling person, you can develop a healthy set of coping skills by working with a mental health professional.

6 Sources 



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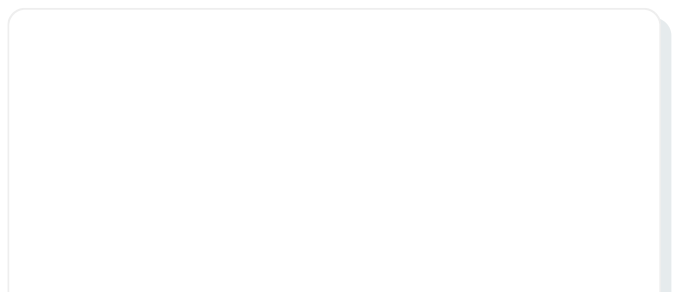
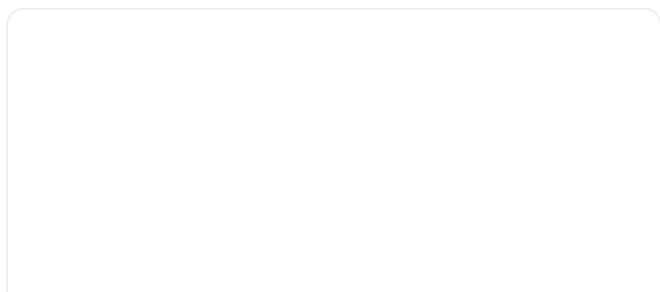


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