

Toolkit for Recovery from

→ **Psychological
Manipulation &
Coercive Control**



Toolkit for Recovery From Psychological Manipulation and Coercive Control

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Introduction

In today's complex social landscape, psychological manipulation (PM) and coercive control (CC) pose a significant threat to people's autonomy and well-being. From hate groups to conspiracy, high-control groups to sex trafficking, the tactics of PM and CC permeate our world and cause harm through various means. In order to help those affected by PM and CC, we must understand the motivations for involvement with manipulative groups and relationships and identify the best path to recovery for exited individuals (EIs).

This toolkit is a comprehensive guide to Recovery from Psychological Manipulation and Coercive Control. It is meant to equip mental health professionals with knowledge and strategies to navigate the intricate dynamics of manipulation and coercion and aid in recovery. By exploring the definitions of PM and CC, understanding practical considerations and looking into motivational factors and mental wellness recovery, this toolkit can act as a guide to help EIs reclaim agency, foster resilience and find purpose and healing beyond the confines of their group or manipulator.

This toolkit is a companion to the [Toolkit for Identifying & Countering Psychological Manipulation & Coercive Control](#). Please refer to that guide for help identifying common signs of PM & CC, exploring motivations for involvement and understanding paths to intervention and prevention.



Section Guide

[Section 1 - Defining and Differentiating PM and CC](#)

Define and differentiate psychological manipulation and coercive control.

[Section 2 - Reasons for Exit](#)

Understand various reasons for exit from a manipulative group, relationship or situation.

[Section 3 - Stages of Involvement](#)

Understand the stages of involvement, from initial attraction, to deep engagement, to critical entrenchment.

[Section 4 - Practical Considerations](#)

Explore practical considerations around exit from a manipulative situation including the need for housing and various types of support.

[Section 5 - Addressing Motivations](#)

Learn to understand and address people's motivations to seek connection and purpose within manipulative environments.

[Section 6 - Mental Wellness Recovery](#)

Explore multiple pathways to recovery from trauma and other issues around involvement with PM and CC.

[Section 7 - Therapeutic Notes](#)

Tips and information regarding unique aspects of recovery from PM and CC.

SECTION 01

**What is PM
& CC?**



Psychological Manipulation (PM)

Psychological manipulation is the intentional use of manipulative tactics to take advantage of people on a psychological level. These tactics are used to control people's decision-making processes to gain money and/or social or political power. These tactics include controlling or manipulating information (mis/disinformation), instilling us vs. them thinking, false promises of empowerment or new understanding, and control of diet, sleep, clothing, finances, sex life and social life.

Psychological manipulation tactics are used in a variety of circumstances, including religious, political or ideological high-control groups, conspiracy groups, hate and supremacy groups, MLMs (multi-level marketing companies), human trafficking, terrorist organizations, corporate environments, intimate partner relationships, high-control psychotherapeutic groups, self-help groups, dictatorships, or any situation in which an individual or individuals might seek power over others or monetary gain at another's expense.

Coercive Control (CC)

Coercive control is a pattern of actions aimed at isolating, humiliating, exploiting, or asserting dominance over a person. These actions may include emotional, verbal, litigation abuse¹, and financial abuse, such as obstructing someone's ability to attend work or school or restricting their financial resources. Coercive control also involves tactics like gaslighting, intimidation, and belittlement.

While coercive control is frequently associated with intimate partner controlling relationships, it is important to recognize that its manipulative tactics can extend beyond this context. Similar tactics can be employed within various settings, including religious, political, or ideological high-control groups, familial abuse and human trafficking.

1. <https://www.womenslaw.org/about-abuse/forms-abuse/litigation-abuse>

Why Differentiate?

It is important to distinguish between psychological manipulation and coercive control due to the nuanced yet crucial differences in their definitions and applications. Although many similarities and crossover tactics are employed in both PM and CC, including love-bombing, gaslighting and various mechanisms of control, PM has broader applications, often involves more than one victim, and usually employs a wider variety of tactics.

The differentiation in terms also has ramifications relating to policy and the legal system. PM is not directly regulated or recognized by governments. Its sprawling definition and set of parameters make it difficult to pinpoint and address within legal frameworks. PM will often be identified and addressed in the context of other crimes resulting from PM, such as fraud, human trafficking or sexual abuse. Conversely, CC is steadily gaining recognition within legal systems and is being adopted into policy² in many countries, primarily within the realm of intimate partner violence and laws pertaining to children and families.

By differentiating between these terms, we acknowledge their distinct characteristics and shed light on the ways in which psychological manipulation and coercive control manifest across diverse scenarios. This can enable a more comprehensive understanding of these issues and help us develop more effective recovery pathways.

2. <https://www.theacecc.com/post/not-all-bills-are-created-equal-a-review-of-coercive-control-legislation>

SECTION 02

Reasons for Exit 

Exiting a manipulative group or relationship is a complex decision influenced by many factors. A comprehensive understanding of these reasons is crucial, as they can shape the trajectory of recovery. Understanding the reasons behind the exit can provide valuable insight into the EI's current situation and emotional state. Here, we explore four potential exit catalysts, each with unique implications for recovery.



Forced Exit

Forced exit occurs when an EI is expelled from a group or relationship through rejection or shunning. This exit is not chosen and can often result from a perceived wrongdoing. This might be the result of a Person Under Influence (PUI) being seen as unworthy in some way, perhaps from questioning the group, being rebellious or saying no too often. In high-control groups, forced exit can also occur when a PUI is seen as a burden for some reason, such as becoming sick or mentally unwell as the majority of high-control groups prefer functioning members who can work and participate fully. Forced exit can lead to deep-seated feelings of worthlessness, rejection and loneliness. Separating from the group or relationship can result in a complete loss of social support and may greatly diminish an EI's sense of value and purpose. The EI will also possibly maintain some of the beliefs, values and ideologies of the group or manipulator and will likely require [intervention](#) to help them think independently and find identity and meaning beyond the group.



Escape

Escape occurs when an EI is able to break free of the manipulative group or relationship despite a threat to their wellbeing. Escape is common in sex trafficking, abusive partnerships, and specific high-control environments. Escape tends to carry significant risk to the EI in the form of physical or legal harm or the potential to be captured and reintegrated into the group or relationship. In the case of escape, a strong and immediate emphasis must be put on helping the EI establish safety and security. This could entail enlisting legal assistance, collaborating with relevant authorities, securing shelter, and ensuring financial support. When it comes to escape, the goals are to keep the EI safe and from reintegration into the group or relationship, which would likely happen through coercion or threat to their wellbeing.

Snapping Out

Snapping out occurs when a PUI realizes that the group or relationship they are involved with is manipulative and damaging. Snapping out can come at any time for any number of reasons. Perhaps a PUI is exposed to outside information about the group or manipulator that is usually hidden. Maybe a close friend can break through and convince a PUI that their situation is manipulative or dangerous. Upon snapping out, it might take a PUI time to make their exit. They might seek to learn more about the group or manipulator or gain more perspectives from others. There might be planning involved if their exit poses a risk or represents a significant loss. Sometimes, PUIs who snap out become whistle-blowers and advocates³, choosing to fight against the manipulative force that took advantage of them. Although snapping out can still carry potential risks, there are typically fewer lingering ideological bonds or belief systems from the group or manipulator, which helps to rebuild critical thinking faculties and assess “truth.” Moreover, individuals who snap out tend to exhibit greater receptivity to reestablishing connections with relationships that may have been lost or damaged while under the influence of the group or manipulator.

Arrest or Imprisonment

Arrest or imprisonment is common in cases of violent extremism, sex trafficking and certain high-control groups that involve criminal activity such as fraud, human trafficking, child abuse or other physical abuse. Often, an arrest can act as a catalyst to help a PUI or others in the group or situation snap out, as it represents a significant loss and serves as a social signal that something is wrong. Arrest or imprisonment can lead to [escape](#) as it often provides the necessary distance from the group or manipulator. An arrest can allow the PUI to question their situation and actions and provide an opportunity for the PUI to plan an exit with the help of authorities. This does not mean that being arrested is in any way ideal. The criminal justice system is often cruel and unjust, with little knowledge or understanding of the mechanisms of psychological manipulation and coercive control. Those influenced by PM and CC are frequently misunderstood and mistreated by the system⁴, so the aim should first be [intervention and prevention](#) to keep PUIs safe from harm.

3. For special considerations regarding whistleblowing and advocacy as healing see [this](#) section.

4. A good example of this is the story of Leslie Van Houten, a Manson follower who spent 50 years in jail for a crime she committed while under the influence of PM and CC: <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/12/1187225790/leslie-van-houten-manson-murder-freed-prison-parole>

Stages of Involvement



Identifying the EI's level of involvement with a manipulative group or individual is an essential step in crafting a recovery plan. There are multiple stages of involvement in a manipulative relationship to consider, and an EI might have exited at any stage. Every stage presents unique challenges and demands, and by understanding them, we can better understand the types of effects the group or relationship may have had on the EI. By distinguishing between these stages, we can customize recovery support, offering help based on the EI's former position on the manipulative spectrum.

Initial Stage

The Initial Stage marks the introduction or early involvement with the group or relationship. Often characterized by love-bombing⁵, the EI would have been lavished with compliments and made to feel highly valued. This stage is typically brimming with excitement, where new ideas or people are captivating, and only subtle cues of manipulation may have emerged. During this period, the EI may still have maintained some external connections, but the manipulator would have encouraged them to question their existing relationships or beliefs. Recognizing problems at this stage would have been difficult, as the manipulative tactics may not have been fully revealed, and the EI's values, relationships, or beliefs might not have been tested enough to raise concern. In this phase, the impact on the EI's friends and family would have been more pronounced than on the EI themselves, as the excitement of new friendships, lifestyles, romantic bonds, or a set of 'truths' would have seemed novel and thrilling.

For more information on signs of PM and CC, see our [red flags list](#).

If the EI exited at this stage, the psychological impact will likely be minimal. However, the initial stage can include significant manipulation in terms of questioning beliefs, values and relationships. The EI might have given themselves, or resources, over to the group or relationship in a way that alienated or damaged their outside relationships, or they may have done some things on behalf of the group or manipulator that triggered [moral injury](#). They might also suffer [intellectual dissonance](#) despite not being part of the group or relationship for long.

⁵ Love-bombing is a common tactic used by high-control groups and manipulators. It involves showering the targeted person with an overwhelming amount of affection, attention, compliments, and gestures of care, with the aim of creating a strong emotional bond and dependency. This tactic is commonly used in the early stages of both PM and CC to establish trust and rapport, ultimately making it easier for the manipulator to exploit vulnerabilities and steer beliefs, actions, or decisions in the desired direction.

Deep Stage

The Deep Stage marks a deeper immersion within the group or relationship. This is a time of substantial involvement and change. During this phase, the EI may have experienced many common harmful tactics of PM and CC. At this stage, the EI might also have become increasingly distanced from their old social circles, resulting in a notable impact on their friends and family. The EI also likely developed a defensive attitude towards the group, relationship, or newly adopted beliefs, making them resistant to alternative viewpoints or introspection. Additionally, the EI may have made significant commitments to the group or manipulator, potentially involving financial investments or severing ties. They might have also taken actions on behalf of the group or manipulator that are misaligned with their values, leading to moral injury, anxiety, or PTSD.

If the EI exited at this stage, there will likely be complex psychological issues to be processed and, depending on the [reasons for exit](#), the EI will likely require [intervention](#) to help them think independently and find identity and meaning beyond the group.

Critical Stage

The Critical Stage represents a phase during which the EI would have become extremely vulnerable due to prolonged exposure to harmful manipulation tactics. The EI will likely have experienced or be experiencing heightened distress and anxiety, having been cut off from their previous social circles and deeply entrenched in the manipulative group or relationship. They may have endured many forms of manipulative abuse, including belittling, erosion of their identity, gaslighting, coerced confession, and, in some instances, physical violence or sexual abuse (especially in the cases of trafficking). Surveillance and monitoring may have hindered their ability to engage in private conversations without being accountable to the group or manipulator. At this stage, EIs will likely have taken actions on behalf of the manipulator or group that are not aligned with their values, which could cause moral injury.

If the EI exits at this stage, there will likely be complex psychological issues and lasting trauma to be processed and, depending on the [reasons for exit](#), the EI may require [intervention](#) to help them think independently as well as find identity and meaning beyond the group. In the case of [escape](#), at this stage, the EI will likely require safety planning and practical security first and foremost.

Steps to Recovery

Recovery for individuals who have exited situations involving psychological manipulation and coercive control (EIs) depends on their [reasons for exit](#). Those who have recently exited will have different recovery needs than those free from manipulation for an extended period. To address these varying needs comprehensively, we will delve into each step of the recovery process, focusing our considerations on the challenges recently exited individuals face.

- 1 Practical Considerations
- 2 Addressing Motivations
- 3 Mental Wellness Recovery

SECTION 04

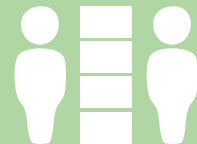
Practical Considerations



Housing



Healthy Food



Physical Separation



Financial Support



Legal Support



Security and Safety of Dependents



Addiction Recovery



Trusted Connections



Medical Support

Before psychological healing can take place, it is vital that an EI has their practical needs met. If an EI is not safe, secure and independent, they will not be able to fully engage with the necessary psychological work. Instability in their physical, legal, financial and social lives can also cause significant issues that will interfere with any progress they might make in recovery. Additionally, addressing practical considerations, underlying motivations, and vulnerabilities might eliminate some of the psychological pain and trauma without needing direct psychological intervention.

When exiting a manipulative group or relationship, there are many immediate concerns. Some EIs will have given a significant amount of their lives, if not all of themselves, over to the group or relationship and may be left with nothing. They may not have a home or family connections. They might have no money or financial independence. They may have legal considerations such as recent arrests (hate groups, high-control groups, MLMs, sex trafficking) or lawsuits to fight (controlling and abusive relationships or litigious high-control groups). They may fear retribution from the group or individual and be scared for their lives and physical safety. These critical concerns must be resolved as initial steps before embarking on the journey towards psychological well-being and recovery.

Housing

Resources to Collect:

- List of trusted real estate agents
- List of nearby emergency shelters
- List of housing assistance programs
- List of apps and websites for short-term housing or rentals

Upon exiting a manipulative situation, establishing a secure and supportive living environment is crucial for the EI's recovery. Depending on their financial resources and circumstances, they may need temporary or permanent housing arrangements. While having an independent residence is ideal, considerations for suitable housing should include the specific dynamics of the group or relationship they left and its impact on their mental well-being.

In instances where manipulative groups or relationships demanded constant companionship and monitored living conditions, the concept of privacy and solitude might be unfamiliar or triggering for the EI. For those accustomed to communal living or closely controlled environments, transitioning to living alone could evoke separation anxiety, fear, or trauma-related responses like flashbacks and depression. Alternatively, for EIs who suffer from a lack of personal space and autonomy, having a private place could offer a sense of peace that could be beneficial.

Given these varying emotional needs, it's vital to carefully assess housing options and select an environment that aligns with the EI's comfort level and recovery requirements. A careful approach helps ensure that the housing situation supports their safety and emotional healing and can help them begin the process of rebuilding their life.

Healthy Food

Resources to Collect:

- List of trusted and trauma-informed nutritionists
- List of nearby food banks
- List of nearby medical programs that support people with disordered eating patterns
- List of websites with health-positive and supportive nutrition guides

In many manipulative situations, especially high-control groups or sex trafficking, the lives of PUIs are often tightly regulated, including their dietary choices. For many EIs, accessing nourishing food becomes critical due to potential malnutrition or physical neglect. Regardless of whether the manipulative group dictated food intake, ensuring access to nutritional food is pivotal for mental well-being and should be included in their recovery plan.

Addressing dietary needs may encompass various aspects. For instance, facilitating access to financial resources could be essential if they cannot afford food. Connecting them with local food banks or community resources can also help secure nutritious options. It is also important to be mindful of potential triggers associated with food that might evoke memories of the manipulative group or relationship. Crafting meal plans that account for these sensitivities can contribute to a more supportive and healing environment for EIs.

Physical Separation

Resources to Collect:

- List of trusted contacts in law enforcement who are PM and CC-trained
- List of trusted PM and CC familiar lawyers
- List of trusted connections that can offer discrete help

In order to ensure an EI's safety and security, they must maintain a complete separation from the group or manipulator. This may involve legal action or collaborating with law enforcement to implement necessary safeguards. In situations where the potential for physical harm exists (sex trafficking, intimate partner controlling relationships, hate groups or specific high-control groups), the EI's protection may entail measures to safeguard their identity or relocate to a safer environment, distanced from the influence of the group or manipulator.

Particularly in cases of forced exit, where loyalty to the group or manipulator still exists, the risk of re-engagement and manipulation remains high. If so, the EI must maintain a significant physical distance. This critical separation allows the EI to acquire the tools to reduce their vulnerability to manipulation to prevent re-engagement.

Financial Support

Resources to Collect:

- List of trusted, PM and CC-sensitive accountants
- List of trusted PM and CC familiar lawyers, both paid and pro bono
- List of trusted contacts at local banks who can offer sensitive, informed help
- List of government and non-profit financial assistance programs
- List of local employment agencies and other employment resources

EIs commonly lack financial independence upon exiting manipulative situations, as PM and CC often involve a financial component. Manipulative groups or individuals frequently coerce PUIs into relinquishing significant financial autonomy, particularly during the **deep** and **critical** stages of PM and CC. It will be important to assist EIs in establishing an autonomous source of income and potentially help them disentangle their finances from the manipulator's control.

Securing independent financial stability for EIs empowers them to regain control over their lives. However, reentering the workforce may pose challenges, especially if EIs have been disengaged for a substantial period, leading to skill gaps. In these cases, retraining or new education may be needed. For EIs with dependents, additional considerations arise, including the need for childcare support.

Navigating these financial challenges requires a holistic approach, including retraining, employment placement, financial education, and the development of social support networks.

Legal Support

Resources to Collect:

- List of trusted PM and CC familiar lawyers, both paid and pro bono
- List of trusted contacts in law enforcement who are PM and CC-trained
- List of websites specialized in issues around PM and CC that provide legal guidance

Exiting manipulative situations often leaves EIs without legal autonomy. Many manipulative situations involve complicated legal entanglements, such as contracts, agreements, or even threats of legal action, which can perpetuate the EI's vulnerability. Some EIs may face arrest or imprisonment due to the manipulative situation. Others may fight legal battles to maintain a connection with their children or maintain control of assets, personal information, or funds.

Providing EIs with legal support and guidance is vital to their safety and security. This support may involve initiating legal actions, such as obtaining restraining or protective orders, especially in cases where physical safety is a concern. Collaborating with law enforcement and legal experts can help secure EIs' safety and ensure that necessary protective measures are in place.

For EIs who have faced false legal accusations or threats from the manipulative group or relationship, debunking falsehoods and defending their rights may be necessary. Helping them find pro bono legal aid, legal clinics, or specialized organizations familiar with manipulative dynamics can be invaluable.

Security and Safety of Dependents

Resources to Collect:

- List of trusted PM and CC familiar lawyers, both paid and pro bono
- List of trusted contacts in law enforcement who are PM and CC-trained
- List of websites specialized in issues around PM and CC that provide legal guidance
- List of trusted local children's aid organizations and social services
- List of trusted websites that offer guidance on issues of child custody and abuse
- List of trusted health hotlines specializing in abuse or mental health

The **safety and security** of dependents is a critical concern when EIs exit manipulative situations, especially if their involvement has put their loved ones at risk or under the influence of the group or manipulator. Dependents could include children, family members, or others who may have been coerced or manipulated as part of the EI's involvement.

For EIs who are parents, issues such as child custody, visitation rights, and legal guardianship must be carefully assessed, with the children's safety as a priority. In cases where manipulative groups or relationships have exploited dependents or used them as leverage, steps should be taken to shield them from potential harm. This may involve legal actions or collaboration with law enforcement. Securing stable living conditions, education, and emotional support for dependents is also crucial. Collaborating with social services, child protective agencies⁶, and legal experts can facilitate creating a safe environment for children embroiled in manipulative situations.

For dependents who have also experienced manipulation, psychological support is essential to help them recover from the trauma and rebuild their lives. Counselling, therapy, and access to mental health resources are vital to this process.

6. When involving [CAS](#) or [law enforcement](#) it is vital to be aware of cultural and racial disparities in treatment and imbalances in the system and take those into consideration when planning around practical considerations.

Addiction Recovery

Resources to Collect:

- List of trusted local recovery programs⁸, group support programs and hospital programs specializing in addiction recovery
- List of trusted trauma-informed medical health professionals trained in PM and CC
- List of trusted websites with resources on addiction and recovery

Addiction recovery can play a role in establishing security for some EIs who may have been manipulated into substance use or had their vulnerability to substance abuse exploited. Addressing addiction is essential as it directly impacts an EI's mental and physical well-being and can be deeply intertwined with the manipulative tactics used by the group or manipulator.

Recognizing and acknowledging any substance abuse issues is the first step toward recovery. EIs should be supported in seeking professional help, such as therapy, counselling, or rehabilitation programs tailored to their specific needs. Medical intervention and detoxification might be necessary in critical cases, and a comprehensive treatment plan should be developed.

Understanding the underlying factors contributing to addiction within the context of the manipulative situation is also vital. This way, therapeutic interventions can address the addiction and the emotional and psychological aspects that led to its development and reinforcement in context.

It is also important to recognize and treat other potential addictions arising from situations of PM and CC. For example, hate addiction⁷ is common when exiting white supremacy or hate groups and must be sufficiently addressed before an EI can heal and rebuild.

EI's might also turn to substance use to fill the void from leaving the group or relationship. It is important to make sure they have access to healthy and positive community, connection and purpose upon leaving so they don't use unhealthy outlets like substances to cope with trauma, loneliness or lack of direction.

7. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0003122417728719?journalCode=asra>

8. Be aware that there are many wellness groups and recovery programs that are high-control and manipulative. Vet the programs carefully and keep an eye out for signs of PM and CC. See our [red flags list](#) for more details.

Trusted Connections

Resources to Collect:

- List of potential trusted connections for the EI
- List of trusted websites with information about rebuilding connections and reconciliation
- List of safe and trusted peer support groups or individuals with similar experiences

Leaving a manipulative group or relationship can be extremely isolating, especially in the [deep](#) or [critical](#) stages if the EI has alienated themselves from their former social world. Therefore, a primary practical concern is the development of at least one or two trusted connections. These connections can provide a touchstone to the world beyond the group or relationship and provide relief from the often devastating feelings of isolation experienced by EIs upon exiting. Trusted connections can be friends, family members, peer-support individuals with similar lived experiences, or even new acquaintances who offer empathy, understanding, and a safe space to share experiences. These connections play a pivotal role in rebuilding a foundation of belonging and countering the psychological effects of manipulation. Trusted connections can contribute not only to emotional well-being but also to practical considerations. They can provide shelter, financial assistance, transportation, and other forms of support that aid in the recovery journey.

Although vital, it is important not to rush the process of trusted connection development. In the beginning, it might be that the EI only feels safe connecting with a therapist, case worker, or social worker. Building trust with other connections may take time, especially if the EI's past involvement with manipulators eroded their ability to trust others. However, making safe connections should be a priority as social safety and connection are as important as food and shelter and are often underestimated as a primary practical consideration. Encouraging EIs to actively engage with these connections, communicate their needs, and seek assistance when necessary can lead to a stronger, more resilient recovery.

Medical Support

Resources to Collect:

- List of trusted medical professionals engaged with trauma-informed care and familiar with PM and CC
- List of local clinics specializing in abuse or sexual violence
- List of local hospitals with specializations in women's health and sexual health

Compassionate and understanding medical support may be required for EIs, especially those involved with sex trafficking or who have undergone physical or sexual abuse. Physical injuries, potential exposure to diseases, or other health concerns must be addressed quickly to avoid further complications. A trauma-informed approach by healthcare professionals trained in PM and CC is essential to create an environment where EIs feel safe and understood. Medical practitioners should be trained to handle trauma and abuse cases sensitively, minimizing retraumatization during examinations or procedures.

SECTION 05

Addressing Motivations



When an EI leaves a manipulative group or relationship, they often experience feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and being overwhelmed by the prospect of navigating the world on their own. There may also be a resurgence of the same motivations that initially drew them into the manipulative situation. Addressing these underlying factors is essential not only to prevent the possibility of reintegration into the group or relationship they just left but also to safeguard them from being susceptible to recruitment into a new manipulative environment, whether it's another group, relationship or situation.

Here, we will explore three key motivations for involvement in a manipulative group or relationship and how you can help EIs by addressing these factors. We will also briefly discuss education as a tool for building resilience.



Community

Human beings are inherently social. We are biologically wired to live in small, tight-knit communities. Only recently in our evolutionary history have we come to see autonomy and self-reliance as things to strive for. But living independently is not what we are built for, and the loneliness it causes has become an epidemic⁹. Establishing and nurturing stable communities that fulfill our social needs has become extremely challenging in today's complex world. It is not uncommon for people to turn to high-control, hate, conspiracy, or other manipulative groups in search of the sense of community they crave. These groups often create a close-knit environment that fosters a shared commitment to a higher purpose, offering people a place to feel acknowledged and validated. Frequently, such groups assume the role of a surrogate family, extending resources, emotional support, solidarity and a profound sense of inclusion. This appeal of a seemingly supportive community holds allure for a wide range of people, particularly those grappling with feelings of isolation and detachment or those experiencing life changes and seeking support.

If an EI feels alone and disconnected from a sense of community, it could lead to vulnerability to recruitment or reintegration. Getting an EI connected to others should be a top priority. This may be difficult depending on how recently the EI exited the manipulative situation, what **stage** they were in, and

9. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

their [reasons for exit](#). If there is a high level of anxiety around connecting with others, psychological work might be necessary first.

If the EI is ready, here are some ways to help them find a sense of community:

- › Help EIs find safe social events, clubs, sports or hobby groups that align with their interests. This might require exploring new interests or re-engaging with old ones that the group or manipulator repressed.
- › Encourage volunteering for local organizations, community initiatives or local advocacy groups. The EI might be interested in getting involved with groups or initiatives that help others who have been through similar experiences¹⁰.
- › Share information about local support groups that align with the EI's challenges. Be sure the support groups are vetted, as groups catering to EIs can sometimes be toxic and manipulative¹¹.
- › Recommend community centers, libraries, or cultural centers where EIs can take workshops and classes and participate in activities that generate healthy community connections.
- › Help EIs find healthy and safe religious or spiritual organizations that offer a sense of community and shared values¹².
- › Connect the EI with mentorship programs that can provide guidance and support.
- › Suggest EIs organize neighbourhood gatherings, potlucks, or community events.
- › If the EI is in school, help them identify school groups and other supports that will connect them with other students and staff.

10. For special considerations regarding whistleblowing and advocacy as healing see [this](#) section.

11. See our [red flags list](#).

12. See our [red flags list](#).

Connection

Although we are seemingly always connected technologically, our society is still profoundly disconnected from things that matter and bring us real fulfillment. As we spend more time on screens and alone in our homes, we move away from connection to each other, the planet, and ourselves. Manipulative groups and relationships offer connection on many different fronts. When people get involved in manipulative groups or relationships, they connect to others—romantically, morally, or ideologically—and connect to something greater than themselves. It might be a religious group that encourages spiritual communion with the divine, a conspiracy group that promises access to secret truths and revelations, a multi-level marketing scheme that offers connections to wealth and privilege, or a romantic relationship that promises something deep and intimate. Either way, some connection is available—to something emotional, spiritual, secret, powerful or romantic. This sense of connection can be incredibly appealing to many people, especially those feeling lonely, disconnected, powerless or disenfranchised.

If an EI feels powerless, disenfranchised or lonely, it is vital to connect them with the necessary support to reduce vulnerability to recruitment or reintegration into the manipulative situation they left. This might come in the form of [practical considerations](#), but here are some other suggestions to help EIs find secure and healthy connections:

- › Help EIs define, understand and practice healthy interpersonal relationship dynamics.
- › Encourage EIs to reconnect with nature by exploring nearby parks and natural spaces.
- › Help EIs identify and develop robust personal connections and reciprocal care networks.
- › Encourage less time on social media by finding rewarding activities to replace screen time and helping develop strategies to disengage.
- › Help EIs find reliable and unbiased sources of information and news.

- › Encourage EIs to maintain strong and weak ties as well. Weak ties can be an important source of connection¹³ and meaningful interaction¹⁴.

Purpose

People want to be useful. They want to help and make a difference. They want to change the world and do something amazing with their lives. But it is often hard to know what and how to do it. The world is becoming ever more complex, and it takes a great deal of knowledge and understanding to make an impact. Evolutionarily, we have also moved away from a constant need to fulfil our primary biological purposes of reproduction and survival. We are left with a void in the place of our fundamental drives. This sense of emptiness and desire for direction leaves us vulnerable and open to influence. Manipulative groups and individuals often promise a sense of purpose, either explicitly or implicitly. High-control groups of all kinds, as well as hate and conspiracy groups, often have a particular mission or set of values to spread that they believe will change the world for the better or, at the very least, change your life. Manipulative and abusive relationships offer the purpose of caring for someone deeply and romantically; this aligns with the deep sense of purpose we are often told we should get from our romantic connections. The sense of purpose on offer in many manipulative groups and relationships is alluring, and these groups or relationships often offer easy answers to complex questions, making the connection to purpose much more accessible.

In order to facilitate recovery and resilience, helping EIs find a sense of greater purpose is paramount. No one can exist solely in recovery, and EIs must find meaning in the world beyond practical considerations and trauma.

Here are some ideas for helping EIs find a greater sense of purpose:

- › Encourage EIs to reflect on their passions, values, interests, and strengths. What activities or causes truly resonate with them? What brings them joy and fulfillment?

13. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/how-casual-daily-interactions-protect-your-health/2018/07/06/fc62a468-4e33-11e8-84a0-458a1aa9ac0a_story.html

14. See [Appendix A](#) for a note on the importance of weak ties.

- › Encourage them to try new hobbies, volunteering opportunities, or activities they've never experienced.
- › Help EIs define and set short-term and long-term goals and identify pathways to achieve them.
- › Help EIs find a mentor or guide in a field of interest.
- › Help EIs identify their core values. Exploring values can serve as a foundation for finding purpose.
- › Encourage EIs to connect with others with diverse perspectives and purposes to understand the breadth of possibility.
- › Explore the possibility of education to enhance or gain new skills. Help the EI find educational funding through grants or scholarships.
- › Explore means of purpose through avenues beyond employment, including community engagement, connection to nature, or volunteering.
- › Encourage EIs to explore without the pressure of immediately finding a specific purpose. Purpose often emerges gradually through experimentation; therefore, it should not be forced. An EI might have also been forced into a specific sense of purpose in the manipulative group or relationship, so "finding purpose" might be triggering. Ensure that there is no pressure on them to choose a direction and that the exploration is joyful and voluntary.



Education

Education can be a powerful tool to build resilience against PM and CC. Collaborating with EIs to recognize common manipulative strategies not only equips them with the ability to resist manipulators but also helps them process their own experiences. By understanding the tactics of manipulation and the reasons they are effective, EIs can work to address and resolve potential [moral injury](#) or [intellectual dissonance](#). For insight into the manipulation tactics employed by different groups, see our [list of red flags](#).

**Mental Wellness
Recovery**



Once an EI is safe and secure and has their [practical needs](#) and [motivations](#) addressed, it might be necessary to go through a psychological healing process. PM and CC are a deep violation of autonomy and trust. Even if no physical abuse is involved, PM and CC can result in significant psychological harm. Depending on the manipulative context, it can also result in a breakdown in an EI's identity. Certain manipulative tactics can overwrite individuals on many levels, drastically altering their core values and personalities. These after-effects must be addressed for an EI to recover a sense of self, autonomy and psychological well-being.

This section will cover some of the key areas of mental wellness that may be impacted by PM and CC. We will also introduce some helpful therapeutic suggestions and offer practical suggestions to aid EI's in psychological recovery. This section is broken down into three areas of recovery: physiological, cognitive and emotional. Please note that although these categories are listed as discrete, there is considerable overlap between them, and the healing process involved will not be linear. Responses from one category may trigger responses from another, so it is best to be flexible and take a holistic approach to mental wellness and recovery.

Physiological Recovery

Before cognitive and emotional healing can begin, an EI must be ready. This involves covering the [practical considerations](#) and helping them feel safe in their bodies by addressing acute and physiological issues. Trauma from PM and CC can manifest in the body in many ways. An EI cannot begin to focus on emotional and cognitive healing if their nervous system is hyperactive or they are experiencing trauma-induced physiological distress. Just as an EI needs a safe physical space to heal, they also need a safe body.

ACUTE ISSUES

Depending on when the EI exited a manipulative situation and where they are in their healing process, an EI might be suffering from acute issues such as:

- › Nightmares and sleep disturbances
- › Flashbacks to manipulative situations or physical or sexual abuse
- › Emotional triggers and sensitivities
- › Acute anxiety and panic attacks
- › Fear of retribution or consequences for leaving the group or manipulator
- › Separation anxiety from the group or manipulator
- › Acute loneliness and social isolation
- › Dissociation or dissociative events

These issues might be so critical that they impair the healing process and must be addressed immediately. If the EI finds an acute issue unmanageable, one consideration is pairing psychological treatment with pharmacological treatment to help reduce the symptoms of anxiety and depression or manage sleep. Referrals to a trusted trauma-informed psychiatrist¹⁵ can be helpful if necessary.

¹⁵. See important note on [diagnoses](#).

Some other forms of treatment for these acute issues to consider are:

Sensory Grounding

Sensory grounding is a good interruption technique and a way to draw attention to the body and counter dissociation or panic attacks. Sensory grounding can help EIs reconnect with their immediate physical environment and their own bodies when experiencing overwhelming emotions, anxiety, dissociation, or other trauma-related symptoms. The goal of sensory grounding is to anchor a person in the present moment and provide a sense of safety and stability.

Exercises

- › Five Things: Have the EI choose and describe five things they can see, four they can feel, three they can hear, two they can smell and one they can taste. By actively engaging with their immediate sensory environment, EIs can anchor themselves to the present moment, fostering a sense of connection with reality and alleviating distress.

Somatic Tracking

Somatic tracking, or body scanning, can be used to increase awareness of bodily sensations and emotional regulation. It involves paying close attention to physical sensations in the body without judgment and can help EIs become more attuned to their bodily experiences and emotions.

Exercises

- › Somatic Tracking for [Pain Reprocessing](#)

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing involves taking slow, deliberate, and controlled breaths to ground, reduce anxiety, and manage panic attacks.

Exercises

- › 5 Mindful Breathing [Exercises](#)

It's important to note that some EIs may be triggered by things such as deep breathing and mindfulness, especially if they recently exited from a self-help or spiritual high-control situation that used those methods as tools of manipulation. Grounding tools like meditation can also be problematic as some may have experienced trauma or mental issues through meditative practices¹⁶. Always ensure that an EI is ready to engage with new methods before introducing them, and be attentive to possible triggers that may cause physiological or emotional responses.

Distractions

When triggers provoke episodes of acute anxiety or panic attacks, it can be beneficial to guide the EI toward adopting positive and healthy distractions to redirect their focus away from the distress. Some ideas for potential distractions include:

- › **Engaging Games or Activities:** Calming phone games, solving puzzles, or engaging in an absorbing creative activity.
- › **Physical Movement:** Walking, doing yoga or gently stretching.
- › **Nature Connection:** Head out to a natural environment like a park or garden.
- › **Social Interaction:** Reaching out to a trusted friend or family member for a supportive conversation or engaging in a positive social interaction, even if it is short.

While addressing and processing trauma, and learning to tolerate distress is crucial for long-term healing, introducing healthy distractions can be useful in managing acute attacks and enhancing overall well-being, especially if the EI is not yet prepared to confront their trauma directly. Note that distraction techniques are not a replacement for processing and learning distress tolerance, but they can be a useful tool to help manage acute symptoms as an EI moves through the healing process.

16. For more information on the potential detrimental effects of meditation see: <https://www.cheetahhouse.org/>

CHRONIC PAIN OR ILLNESS

Trauma can manifest in the body¹⁷, leading to chronic pain or illness for EIs. Understanding that this chronic pain is neuroplastic is crucial. Neuroplasticity implies that the brain's structure and function can change in response to trauma-related experiences. Therefore, chronic pain resulting from trauma can potentially be alleviated through trauma processing and pain reprocessing techniques¹⁸. By addressing the underlying trauma, it's possible to bring relief to the physical symptoms and improve the overall well-being of the EI.

PHYSICAL WELLNESS

Physical health plays a crucial role in mental healing and recovery from PM and CC. Our minds and bodies are intricately connected, so we need to nurture both. Engaging in regular physical activity, maintaining a balanced diet, and prioritizing adequate sleep are essential components that contribute to mental resilience. Physical well-being directly influences emotional stability, cognitive function, and psychological health. By taking care of their physical health, EIs can boost their energy levels, enhance their ability to manage stress and promote the release of endorphins, which are natural mood regulators. The act of caring for the body also symbolizes self-compassion and a commitment to rebuilding an EI's sense of agency and control.

Here are some ways to help EI's practice physical wellness:

- › Help them develop a list of self-care activities
- › Help them schedule to prioritize self-care
- › Help them create a plan to engage in regular activity
- › Provide a list of safe and vetted gyms or exercise programs
- › Help them find techniques to ensure adequate sleep
- › Help them plan healthy meals and find resources to ensure access to [healthy foods](#)

17. <https://www.besselvanderkolk.com/resources/the-body-keeps-the-score>

18. <https://www.painpsychologycenter.com/how-it-works/>

Cognitive Recovery

Once an EI has a feeling of control over the acute and physiological symptoms related to their experiences with PM and CC, it is important to engage with their cognitive recovery. Cognitive steps are important to reorient them in the world and reclaim a sense of self before they delve deeper into their emotional healing.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

When dealing with extreme loneliness, isolation and separation anxiety, emphasizing social connection is vital. Help the EI build a list of [trusted connections](#) and find [community](#) and connections that are safe and reliable and bring them joy.

REBUILDING BOUNDARIES

While under the influence of PM or CC, an EI will likely have experienced an erosion of boundaries, sometimes to an extreme extent.

EIs may have surrendered some of the following boundaries:



Personal Space

Manipulators might have demanded more and more time with the EI and lessened their involvement with other relationships and activities.



Physical Freedom

Manipulators might have demanded constant accountability and could have even implemented a tracking system to monitor the EI's whereabouts.



Privacy

Manipulators might have demanded confessions or knowledge of the EI's innermost thoughts or details about their intimate relationships.



Autonomy

Manipulators might have demanded the right of refusal and a say in the EI's day-to-day activities. They might have made rules around the EI's sex life, diet, style, exercise habits, etc.



Financial Freedom

Manipulators might have taken control of the EI's finances or monitored them, restricting purchases and the ability for EI to save money for the future.



Freedom of Dissent

Fear of retaliation, punishment, or rejection may have prevented the EI from expressing dissenting opinions or questioning the manipulator's directives.

Depending on how long the EI was under the influence of the manipulation, they may leave the situation with extremely distorted boundaries and a great degree of difficulty or guilt in saying no.

Here are some ways to help EIs rebuild their boundaries:

Reflect & Clarify

Help the EI reflect on their past experiences with the group or manipulator and identify instances where their boundaries were crossed or violated. Work to help them recognize the signs of boundary violations, such as feeling uncomfortable, manipulated, or disrespected. Learn about the [red flags](#) of PM and CC and highlight how these tactics violate boundaries.

Encourage the EI to clarify their values, needs, and priorities and decide what is acceptable and unacceptable in their interactions with others. List-making can be a helpful exercise here. Encourage the EI to make lists of their boundaries¹⁹ and the signs (emotional or outward) that their boundaries are being violated. Understanding the emotional cues for boundary violation is crucial to helping an EI learn to listen to their instincts and to trust their feelings about people and situations.

Define & Communicate

Help the EI define their boundaries in various areas of their life, such as relationships, personal space, emotions, and time. Help them learn to communicate their boundaries assertively and without apology. Try getting the EI to practice saying "no" to requests or situations that go against their boundaries through roleplayed conversations or low-stakes situations with trusted connections.

¹⁹. For more guidance on creating boundaries, see the boundary section in our [Toolkit for Helping Your Loved Ones](#).

Help the EI establish consequences for those who consistently violate their boundaries and enforce consequences by reducing contact or involvement with individuals who do not respect their limits. Remember that this might trigger some EIs if their manipulative situation involved shunning or other punishment methods involving cutting off contact.

Accept & Acknowledge

Help the EI accept that not everyone will honour or respect their boundaries and that this does not need to negatively affect them. Assure them that setting boundaries is a healthy and important practice and that they have value regardless of others' reactions.

If someone disregards their boundaries, help the EI to uncover the underlying reasons for this behaviour. Encourage open communication with that person²⁰ to explore their perspective while empowering the EI to assert their boundaries and make decisions aligned with their well-being.

Continuously acknowledge the EI's progress in rebuilding boundaries by celebrating small victories and encourage the EI to be patient with themselves as they navigate this complex process.

RELATIONSHIP RECOVERY

Addressing relationship recovery is crucial, as PM and CC often exploit isolation, leaving EIs estranged from their existing support systems. EIs may encounter challenges rebuilding old relationships and forming new ones due to lingering trust issues and fears of being taken advantage of. Relationship recovery is paramount, though, as a robust and healthy social circle is crucial to recovery and mental well-being. Here are some suggestions to help with relationship recovery is paramount, though, as a robust and healthy social circle is crucial to recovery and mental well-being.

Here are some suggestions to help with relationship recovery:

²⁰. As long as it is safe for the EI.

- › Suggest that the EI work toward [making amends](#)
- › Suggest the EI start with small interactions and gradually increase the level of engagement
- › Suggest a trauma and PM and CC informed mediator or family counsellor to help navigate complex family or interpersonal reconnections
- › Help the EI establish good [boundaries](#) and develop a [list of warning signs](#) of manipulation to ensure they will not be taken advantage of again

RECLAIMING IDENTITY & SELF

Often, in situations of PM and CC, the identity of the PUI is subsumed and overwritten to reflect the beliefs, values, interests and goals of the group or manipulator. When an EI exits a group or manipulative relationship, they often find themselves looking to reclaim their own sense of self and autonomy.

Here are some ways to help an EI reconnect with their sense of identity:

Explore the Self

Encourage the EI to reconnect with their pre-manipulation self by reflecting on their former core values, aspirations, passions, and beliefs²¹. Help them analyze how these aspects of themselves might have shifted during their time in the manipulative situation. While it is common for EIs to want to reject everything they learned during this time, it is important to acknowledge that there might be some positive takeaways. Manipulative groups often draw people in by tapping into a grain of truth or something appealing to the EI. Help the EI discover what that appeal was. Helping others? Being in love? Feeling connected? Having a greater understanding of themselves or the world?

Help the EI imagine their future self and guide them to integrate positive aspects from their experience with the elements of the identity they want to preserve. Remind them that they can shape their identity and choose who they want to become.

²¹. In some cases, an EI might not have a pre-manipulation self. See the [Being Born In](#) section for more details.

When exploring the self it is also important to help the EI reframe any negative self-imagining that may have been instilled by their manipulator. Manipulators will often take a positive trait and twist it into something negative to use as a tool of manipulation. For example, if a PUI is interested in making people happy or keeping the peace, a manipulator might say they are weak, a push-over or a people-pleaser. These negative self-images must be re-framed so an EI can reclaim the parts of themselves that are valuable and authentic.

Reject Manipulative Messaging

During their involvement with the group or manipulator, an EI might have internalized false beliefs about themselves and the world. These distortions can undermine their sense of self-worth and contribute to negative self-talk. By helping them identify and replace these false beliefs, we can support their journey toward recovery.

Here is a potential path to helping an EI reject manipulative messaging:

- › **Identify False Beliefs:** Encourage the EI to reflect on the beliefs they developed during their time with the manipulative group. Create a list of these beliefs without passing judgment.
- › **Question the Validity:** Guide the EI in critically examining the validity of these beliefs. Encourage them to ask themselves: "Is there actual evidence to support this belief? Could there be alternative explanations?"
- › **Recognize Cognitive Distortions²²:** Help the EI recognize cognitive distortions (such as black-and-white thinking or overgeneralization) present in their false beliefs. Teach them to identify and challenge these distortions.
- › **Gather Contradictory Evidence:** Encourage the EI to gather evidence contradicting their false beliefs. This evidence can be drawn from personal experiences, observations, or feedback from trusted connections.
- › **Formulate Accurate Beliefs:** Guide the EI in formulating

22. Checklist of [cognitive distortions](#).

more accurate and balanced beliefs. Assist them in generating positive statements that counteract the false beliefs they hold.

- › **Practice Positive Self-Talk:** Teach the EI techniques for practicing positive self-talk. For each false belief, help them create a positive affirmation that reinforces their self-worth.

Saying Yes

Manipulative situations are highly restrictive in so many ways. Part of an EI reclaiming their identity means choosing when to say yes. This sense of self-control is vital to self-expression. In their manipulative situation, an EI might have been told what to wear, eat, say, who to have sex with, and when to wake up or go to bed. Those choices are all their own now, which is something to celebrate. When they are ready, encourage them to be a bit wild and free with saying yes. Encourage them to make mistakes, eat too much cake sometimes, stay up too late, and try new things, even if they are a little risky. Learning to trust themselves and the world again is an important step toward healing. And, as important as [learning to say no](#) is, yes is just as vital.

Emotional Recovery

Once EIs are on solid ground [practically](#), [physiologically](#) and [cognitively](#), they will be ready to work through any emotional issues resulting from their experience with PM and CC. By laying the foundations through the other processes, they will be able to approach these emotional challenges with trust, connection and safety.

GUILT & MORAL INJURY

Often, when under the influence of PM or CC, an EI will engage in actions that go against their moral values, beliefs or ethical principles. This can include alienating or abusing their loved ones, engaging in sexual activity that defies their boundaries or values, abusing or hurting others, or recruiting others into their manipulative situation. These actions can cause a deep and lasting sense of guilt, shame, moral ambiguity and loss of trust in themselves or others. This is also known as moral injury. An EI will likely blame themselves for their actions under the influence of manipulation. Although taking responsibility for

their actions is important, it is vital to help the EI understand that psychological manipulation violates their free will. So, their actions were not theirs completely, and the blame lies with the manipulator.

Here are some suggestions to help alleviate moral injury and guilt:

Educate

Educating EIs about the tactics²³ of PM and CC is a crucial step in their recovery. By shedding light on the tactics used to control them, EIs can gain a deeper understanding of how their autonomy was compromised within the manipulative situation. This understanding can help alleviate the weight of responsibility they might feel for their actions.

Providing real-life examples or stories from others who have experienced similar manipulation tactics can be helpful in the education process. It's essential to highlight that the tactics employed are meticulously crafted to exploit common human motivations and desires, making them incredibly compelling and challenging to resist.

Through education about PM and CC, EIs can recognize that their experiences are not isolated and that the manipulation they endured was a calculated effort to undermine their autonomy. This knowledge can empower EIs to overcome self-blame and take steps toward reclaiming their sense of self and agency.

Make Amends

Assisting EIs in making amends with individuals they may have harmed is an important step in their recovery process. This process can be complex, as PM and CC involve intricate dynamics that are not easily understood. EIs might struggle to comprehend the depth of control tactics and their impact on their actions.

Guiding EIs to take responsibility and offer explanations and apologies is a nuanced endeavour. It is essential to help them balance acknowledging their actions without succumbing to self-blame. This balance involves recognizing that while EIs

23. See our [red flags list](#).

took actions they now regret, they were under the influence of psychological manipulation that compromised their free will. Empowering EIs to reconcile and apologize involves emphasizing that apologies are still necessary and providing explanations can help others understand their situation.

Additionally, EIs should be prepared for the possibility that forgiveness may not be granted, but making amends is still worthwhile. Encouraging this process with compassion and understanding can help EIs navigate the complexities of making things right with those they have affected.

Reinforce

It is crucial to empower the EI to strengthen their understanding of their ethical values. This process involves encouraging them to delve into their core values and consider the kind of moral agent they aspire to be moving forward.

Some questions to guide this exploration include:

- › **Identifying Core Values:** What principles and beliefs define who you are? What values are non-negotiable for you?
- › **Aspiring Bystander:** Imagine a situation where your morals are challenged. How would you want to respond as a bystander? What actions align with your ethical compass?
- › **Lessons Learned:** Reflect on your experience with PM and CC. How can your journey help you develop more compassion and understanding for others in similar situations? What insights can you share to prevent others from falling victim?
- › **Future Resilience:** Based on your core values, how can you proactively prepare to stand by your convictions in the face of manipulation? What strategies can you develop to safeguard your autonomy and reinforce your resilience?

Engaging in this reflective process enables the EI to rebuild their sense of self and autonomy. By clarifying their ethical values and envisioning their role as a moral agent, they can better guard against future manipulation attempts. This process also empowers them to contribute positively to their own growth and the well-being of others by leveraging the lessons learned from their own experience.

INTELLECTUAL DISSONANCE

“How could I be so stupid?”

“How could I have fallen for that”

“I thought I was smarter than this.”

Intellectual dissonance is the self-doubt that arises when an EI leaves a manipulative situation and realizes they have been taken advantage of. Intellectual dissonance represents the internal conflict between an EI’s perceived intelligence and the acknowledgment of having been manipulated. It is often a source of emotional distress and causes an EI to doubt their beliefs, intelligence and decision-making abilities. Here are some suggestions to help alleviate intellectual dissonance:

Educate

Educate and empower EIs with insights into the tactics of PM and CC²⁴ by sharing examples or relatable stories from others who have encountered similar manipulations. These narratives underscore the universal vulnerability to psychological manipulation and highlight that anyone, regardless of intelligence or education, can be manipulated. By emphasizing the indiscriminate nature of manipulation, EIs can recognize that their experience is not indicative of their intelligence but rather a reflection of tactics designed to exploit human psychology.

Rebuild

Help rebuild the EI’s self-worth by identifying and celebrating their accomplishments, strengths, and areas of intelligence. Highlight their unique qualities, talents, and how they have demonstrated thoughtfulness, compassion and intelligence. Reinforce the notion that intelligence comes in many forms, extending beyond traditional measures and encompassing emotional intelligence, resilience, empathy, and life experience. Help the EI understand that knowledge of PM and CC tactics is not widespread, and they are not to blame for falling prey to them. Encourage them to recognize that these manipulative tactics exploit fundamental human motivations, making anyone susceptible, regardless of their intelligence or awareness.

²⁴. See our [red flags list](#).

TIME LOSS

Upon exiting a manipulative group or relationship, many EIs will experience a profound sense of mourning around the time they lost. This is especially true of those recovering from involvement with high-control groups. In a manipulative situation, an EI has their autonomy removed and often feels like their actions are not their own. Often, personal growth in a manipulative environment is attributed to the manipulator or group, making it so the EI has no perceived impact beyond their efforts to conform to the group's rules or do the work they were assigned. Because of this, when they leave the group or relationship, an EI might feel that their time was not theirs. They may even feel disassociated from their time if they were deeply indoctrinated and so may not feel as if they were even themselves. Time loss can be especially acute if the EI feels as though they were taken away from a potentially productive path (career, social or otherwise), lost important developmental years to the group or relationship, or was forced to miss significant life events in the lives of their social group such as weddings, funerals or births.

Time loss is a form of regret and can be tied in with [guilt or moral injury](#), but may also manifest as anger and resentment towards the manipulative group or individual.

Here are some suggestions to help EIs heal from time loss:

- › Engage them in grief-based therapies²⁵ which offer a wide array of perspectives on approaching grief and loss.
- › Remind them that mourning is a complex process that is different for everyone. They may experience it for a month, a year or for the rest of their lives, which is okay.
- › Encourage them to explore the different types of feelings that arise and remind them that each feeling is valid.
- › Gently guide them away from "If only" thinking. If only thoughts may arise if something difficult happens in their life or they are struggling with their mental health. The "if only" is usually a thought of "if only I didn't join that group or get involved with that relationship." Remind them that what happened to them was unfair and terrible, but there is no use speculating about "if onlys."

25. <https://online.maryville.edu/blog/grief-counseling/>

- › Help them look forward to all the time they have ahead as free individuals.
- › Work with them to develop new goals, passions and connections to make good use of their time now that they are free.
- › Work with them on mindfulness practices that allow them to take pleasure from small things and enjoy moments from a present perspective without focusing on the past or the future.
- › Mourning may persist if something is unresolved in an EI's experience. Carefully explore any feelings of unresolved justice that may arise. Sometimes, mourning can act as a catalyst for action and justice that can be safely explored through [whistleblowing or advocacy](#).

FEAR OF MANIPULATING OTHERS

A common fear that many EIs grapple with is the fear of unintentionally hurting or manipulating others. This fear is a testament to the compassion and empathy that often define EIs, but it can also create significant challenges in rebuilding relationships and forming new connections.

The experience of being subjected to PM and CC can blur the lines between healthy interaction and manipulation. It can also impact an EI's sense of self, as they may have been gaslit into believing they were the problem. EIs might fear that their old experiences with or newfound knowledge of manipulation tactics could inadvertently lead them to behave in manipulative ways themselves. This internal conflict can hinder their ability to trust their instincts, engage with others authentically, and express themselves openly.

Here are some ways to help EIs overcome this fear and nurture healthier relationships:

- › **Education:** Help EIs differentiate between healthy interactions and manipulative behaviours. Recognizing the signs of manipulation empowers them to make conscious choices and avoid replicating harmful patterns.

- › **Self-Exploration:** Help EIs to understand their motivations and intentions better. By exploring their core values and beliefs, they can develop a strong self-awareness that will guide interactions with others.
- › **Boundaries and Communication:** Assist EIs in setting clear and healthy boundaries in their relationships. Help them develop effective communication skills to express their needs, concerns, and intentions transparently. Emphasize that open communication fosters trust and minimizes misunderstandings.
- › **Building Empathy:** Encourage EIs to channel their empathy into understanding others' perspectives and feelings. This can strengthen their ability to connect genuinely while alleviating fears of manipulation.
- › **Self-Forgiveness:** Remind EIs that everyone makes mistakes, and the journey of recovery is about growth. Encourage self-forgiveness and self-compassion as they learn and evolve.

Therapeutic Notes

Here are some additional considerations when treating an EI.



Diagnoses

Trauma resulting from PM and CC can have a wide range of psychological and emotional effects on EIs. These effects can sometimes manifest in ways that resemble symptoms of other mental health disorders²⁶ such as OCD, ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, BPD, Depression or Anxiety Disorders.

It's essential to recognize that these symptoms are often a reaction to the traumatic experiences endured in manipulative environments. As a result, diagnoses of mental health disorders in EIs are not recommended until they are [stable practically](#) and their trauma has been treated. If other diagnoses are given during their recovery, this can mask the underlying trauma, create stigmatization and misunderstanding, and may lead to ineffective treatments.

Instead of immediate diagnosis, it's advisable for EIs to engage in trauma-informed therapy and support to address the root causes of their distress. This approach allows them to heal, regain a sense of self, and better understand how their experiences in manipulative environments have influenced their mental and emotional well-being. Once healing has progressed, any persistent mental health symptoms can be assessed more accurately.

Ideology

In cases involving high-control groups, whether religious, hate-based, conspiratorial, or self-help-oriented, EIs may have adopted intricate and convoluted ideologies encompassing concepts, myths, prophecies, common truths, and clichés. These ideologies can distort an EI's perception of reality. This makes it challenging to access external information or engage in independent thought. Depending on their [reasons for exit](#), an EI might still hold onto some of this ideology, making it difficult to treat the underlying issues.

When supporting an EI in recovery, it is essential to avoid delving into the group's or manipulator's ideology. Instead, focus on discussions about their personal feelings, experiences, and thoughts. This can be particularly difficult, as the deeply ingrained ideology may be a last link to the group or manipulator they fear letting go of.

Here are some ways to avoid complex ideology while assisting EIs:

²⁶. https://cewh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2013_TIP-Guide.pdf - Pg. 15, Section 2.5

- › **Keep it Simple:** Use straightforward language that avoids triggering pre-programmed counter-ideology responses, such as clichés, idioms, or stereotypes.
- › **Rephrase Complex Ideas:** Encourage EIs to rephrase complex notions in plain language. This helps them better understand their thoughts and enables you to engage in more meaningful discussions.
- › **Stay Grounded:** Gently guide the conversation back to present realities, practical matters, emotions, or aspects they can control whenever the EI starts using excessive ideological jargon.

By carefully steering the EI away from ideological engagement, you can help create a safe space for meaningful communication and reflection. This can help EIs gradually break free from the grip of complex ideologies and regain their clarity of thought, which is necessary for further psychological healing.



Storytelling

After leaving a high-control or manipulative situation, EIs can feel a strong urge to share their story openly or privately. This desire can stem from various motivations, such as the need to process their experiences, seek validation, and extend support to others trapped in similar circumstances. While recounting their narrative can be both empowering and cathartic, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential risks associated with sharing, especially when there is a possibility of retaliation from the group or manipulator.

The process of storytelling can hold immense healing potential. It can help EIs gain new perspectives, channel their experiences into a creative outlet, make sense of their experience, reduce anxiety through desensitization, and reclaim authorship of their life's narrative.

To guide EIs in sharing their story, it's important to ensure they choose safe and appropriate platforms, avoid exposing themselves to harmful feedback if they decide to share publicly, and maintain healthy boundaries to protect their well-being while navigating the path of healing.

See the section on [Advocacy and Whistleblowing](#) for more information.

Cultural Awareness

Treating individuals who have experienced PM and CC with cultural awareness is essential for providing effective support and healing. Cultural awareness acknowledges the impact of an individual's cultural background, beliefs, and experiences on their understanding of and response to trauma. When working with EIs, a culturally sensitive approach that embraces their unique cultural rituals, customs, and perspectives can be instrumental in the healing process.

Understanding the intersectionality of trauma is essential. Exploring how various aspects of identity, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, intersect to shape the EI's encounters with PM and CC can help ensure tailored support.

Avoiding bias and stereotypes is also fundamental to creating a safe, healing environment. Practitioners should keep up with cultural sensitivity to prevent inadvertent biases from interfering with the therapeutic process. Additionally, seeking guidance from cultural experts or consulting with members of the EI's community may become necessary to gain deeper insights into their unique cultural perspectives and facilitate a more culturally responsive approach to healing.

Cultural awareness in treating EIs is not just about being inclusive; it's about providing care that respects, validates, and empowers individuals within their cultural contexts.

Advocacy and Whistleblowing

Some EIs who escape or snap out of their manipulative situation might choose to become advocates or whistleblowers. This can take a variety of forms. They might devote themselves to legally bringing down the group, individual or organization. They might share their story to inspire others to avoid manipulative situations like theirs. They might dedicate themselves to helping others by becoming therapists or social workers. Finding passion and purpose in preventing the abuse that was suffered is not uncommon or unhealthy. However, there are considerations regarding mental wellness and healing from a traumatic experience.

Benefits to consider:

- › Advocacy, whistleblowing and [storytelling](#) are great ways for an EI to intellectually and socially process their experience. Many approaches to trauma healing suggest that creating a trauma narrative²⁷ can help alleviate the anxiety of the trauma through repetition.
- › Learning more about the mechanisms behind PM and CC for advocacy purposes can be helpful for an EI to process their experiences intellectually. By getting to know the signs of PM and CC and how they were manipulated, EIs will better understand what they went through and why, which could alleviate some symptoms of guilt, moral injury or intellectual dissonance.
- › Advocacy is a great way to regain a sense of purpose that might have been lost when leaving the manipulative group or relationship. The EI might also find ways to connect with other EIs and form bonds and social connections.

Drawbacks to consider:

- › EIs may go straight from the manipulative group or relationship into whistleblowing or advocacy. They may feel their sense of purpose overrides their need to find safety and reconnect with life outside the group or manipulator. This may be because they are operating from insecurity, fear, guilt or mourning. Motivations should be assessed to ensure that the EI is not undertaking their new mission in a way that interferes with their processing and healing.
- › EIs who take their story or fight public may face legal challenges or risks to themselves or their dependents depending on how retributive the group or manipulator is. It is essential that before an EI goes public, they understand and accept the full scope of the risks involved.
- › Public healing and processing can be challenging. Often, in manipulative groups and relationships, PUIs are forced to share every detail of themselves with the group or manipulator. This can lead to an erosion of boundaries around what and when to share parts of your inner life. If there was a culture of confession in the group or relationship

27. <https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-guide/trauma-narratives>

the EI was involved in, assessing their motivations for going public with their processing and healing is a good idea. The risks include oversharing or compulsively sharing and relying on external sources (like a social media audience) for approval.

False Memories

Occasionally, an individual who has been subject to manipulation might recount a shocking and extraordinary tale. While PM and CC can manifest in numerous intricate ways, there are instances where the manipulation involves falsely implanted "repressed" memories. One notable example is the Satanic Panic²⁸ of the 1980s, which saw a surge of unverified cases involving alleged satanic abuse, often fueled by conspiracy theories and false memories implanted by therapists. This phenomenon persists in certain circles, with conspiracy theories and repressed memories of ritualistic abuse being perpetuated by groups like QAnon²⁹ and figures like Teal Swan³⁰ within the self-help community. It's crucial to note that while these memories may be false, individuals who hold them remain influenced by psychological manipulation, albeit not for the reasons they believe. Identifying false memories involves recognizing wild and unsupported claims involving extreme acts like torture, murder, and cannibalism, often accompanied by elaborate plots and cover-ups.

False memories can also involve less fantastical stories of abuse, which are more difficult to spot. This can occur if a group or manipulator uses false memories to isolate a PUI from friends and family by implicating them in fabricated abuses. This tactic is an effective strategy to create conflict and distance between a PUI and their social circle. False memories can also result from police interrogation or certain psychotherapeutic situations.

Issues around false memories are incredibly complex, as those with false memories often still suffer from trauma, even if their memories are not grounded in reality. Working through that trauma then becomes a choice of whether to work to dismantle the perceived reality of the memories or to help the individual overcome them as though they really happened. Due to the complexity, it is essential to approach such cases with sensitivity and careful consideration.

28. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satanic_panic

29. <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/18/997559036/americas-satanic-panic-returns-this-time-through-qanon>

30. <https://www.salon.com/2018/09/19/teal-swan-a-glam-guru-for-the-youtube-age-with-controversial-views-on-death/>

RESOURCES & FURTHER READING

Constructing Rich False Memories of Committing Crime

A study relating to police interrogation and false memory construction.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0956797614562862>

Creating False Memories

A discussion of various studies related to the generation of false memories.

<https://staff.washington.edu/eloftus/Articles/sciam.htm>

Rich False Memories of Autobiographical Events can be Reversed

A study in which false memories were both generated and reversed.

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.2026447118>

More Than Suggestion: The Effect of Interviewing Techniques From the McMartin Preschool Case

A discussion about a satanic panic false memory case from the 1980s.

<https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.torontomu.ca/fulltext/1998-02893-001.html>

Being Born In

If an EI was born into a manipulative situation such as a religious high-control group, there will be different considerations involved with healing. This is because they will not have an identity or social world to return to and instead must build their lives from scratch. In cases such as this, practical considerations will be paramount. Creating a stable life outside the group or relationship might be hindered by a lack of experience in the outside world. Job skill training will be vital and may require a lot of education, such as obtaining a high school degree.

Building identity will also be challenging, given that their identity will be solely based on the group or relationship, and they will have no “former self” to compare to. Focusing on a sense of **purpose** and direction based on their interests can help develop new pathways. Also, helping them find the positives about their experiences growing up can guide what kind of life they may be looking to build now and prevent hopelessness or disillusionment.

Socialization is also key to developing a new life beyond the group or relationship. Establishing safe, trusted connections, particularly with former members with similar backgrounds, can ease the isolating transition. These connections provide a platform for shared values and experiences, helping recovery. While recovery for those born into high-control environments shares similarities with others, acknowledging these differences is essential to facilitate the healing journey and support the EI in growing and thriving in their new life.



Sexual Recovery

Sexual recovery is highly complex and individualized and so cannot be fully covered in this toolkit. However, the first and most important step is to find a qualified therapist who is trained in sexual trauma and healing, ideally with knowledge of PM and CC.

Control of sexuality and sexual expression is common in sex trafficking, intimate partner controlling relationships and many high-control groups. This may involve forced sex work, sexual abuse, control of sexual encounters or forced change of gender expression or sexual orientation. Often, in the cases of sex trafficking and certain high-control groups, this sexual abuse involves the exploitation of children or teenagers. When EIs leave manipulative environments, they may require extensive recovery from sexual or sexuality-related trauma. Each EI's healing will depend on the context and type of manipulation and abuse they endured, and they will likely require specialized support that is trauma-informed and sexual recovery focussed.

Many EIs who suffer from sexual abuse within a manipulative context may also be involved in legal battles or whistleblowing. This can be a source of retraumatization as the legal system creates an unsafe environment in which EIs are forced to repeat their story continuously. This is sometimes done to defend themselves or at the risk of not receiving justice. In these cases, special care must be taken to ensure the EI's mental wellness, and advocacy on behalf of the EI might be required.

More generally, establishing and asserting boundaries is paramount to sexual recovery as firm boundaries will allow an EI to navigate and explore their own experiences comfortably and in their own time. Relationship therapy may be required if the EI is in an intimate partner relationship where sexual dynamics

are involved. Safe romantic relationships can provide healthy avenues for exploration and boundary setting, but they can also be difficult to navigate for those struggling with sexual trauma.

Additionally, trusted and safe sexual education can be helpful for EIs to gain a better understanding of healthy sexual dynamics. Sexual education can act as an introduction (if necessary) to discussions about consent, pleasure, mutual satisfaction, sexual orientation and all the possibilities inherent in healthy romantic and sexual relationships.



Appendix A

SMALL KINDNESSES

By Danusha Laméris

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead — you first," "I like your hat."