

Toolkit for Engaging with

→ **Those Affected
by Psychological
Manipulation or
Coercive Control**



(counter)

Toolkit for Engaging with Those Affected by Psychological Manipulation and Coercive Control

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Introduction

Even when someone is in a difficult or manipulative situation, they reveal who they are and what they need through their words and actions. People drop hints about their inner thoughts, struggles, and hopes, whether consciously or unconsciously. However, to uncover these insights, we must improve our ability to ask the right questions and truly listen to what is being said (and sometimes, what is left unsaid). Thoughtful questioning and attentive listening allow us to meet people where they are, showing them they are not alone and that we care about their well-being.

Often, people hesitate to ask questions because they believe it's rude or intrusive. While some conversations do require sensitivity, letting go of the fear of asking questions is crucial. When framed properly—with empathy and curiosity—questions will not come across as rude. Instead, they become powerful tools for connection. People generally appreciate being asked thoughtful, non-judgmental questions because it shows someone is genuinely interested in their experience.

Asking questions is one of the clearest ways to show we care. It signals to the other person that their thoughts, feelings, and experiences matter. When someone is in a controlling or manipulative situation, they may feel silenced, misunderstood, or isolated. A well-framed question can open the door to conversations they haven't felt safe to have, allowing them to reflect, express emotions, or consider new perspectives. Even simple questions—if asked sincerely—can make a person feel valued and heard, which is vital for those who feel trapped or disconnected from supportive relationships.

However, the tone and framing of questions matter. It's important to approach these conversations with curiosity, not judgment. Questions should feel like invitations, not interrogations. For instance, instead of asking, *"Why would you stay in that group/relationship?"* (which may imply judgment), it's more helpful to ask, *"What keeps you connected to the group?"* or *"What has your experience in the group/relationship been like so far?"* These types of questions offer space for reflection without forcing the person into a defensive stance.

Ultimately, the goal is not to push answers but to create an environment where the person feels comfortable sharing. Open, respectful questions help people express their thoughts freely, fostering trust and connection. Our willingness to listen deeply—without rushing to judge or solve their problems—can be as impactful as our questions. We show people they are seen, heard, and valued through careful questioning and genuine listening, even in difficult situations.

Throughout this process remember that trust isn't built overnight, especially when someone has been manipulated or is vulnerable. Be patient—meaningful conversations often unfold over time. Let go of the need for immediate breakthroughs. It might take months or even years, but patience and persistence pay off.

If you are feeling overwhelmed or too angry with the situation to engage, take a step back and seek support. Whether that is therapeutic support or help from loved ones, ensuring you take breaks is important. You can't be present with somebody under the influence of manipulation unless you are open and calm yourself. See our [Toolkit for Helping Loved Ones](#) and [Youth](#) for more information about setting boundaries and engaging in good self-care.



Section Guide

A Toolkit for Engaging with Those Affected by Psychological Manipulation and Coercive Control

Section 1 - Preparing for Hard Conversations

This section provides reflective questions to ask yourself to prepare for hard conversations.

Section 2 - Asking Questions

This section provides information and guidance on asking open and compassionate questions.

- › Open & closed questions
- › Embracing complexity
- › Sample opening questions for meaningful conversations

Section 3 - Listening

This section provides guidance on listening in a way that is non-judgemental and supportive.

- › Letting go of assumptions
- › Dropping the ego
- › Pick up conversation threads
- › Treat the person as an expert
- › Avoiding fix-it mode
- › Body language
- › Clarifying and reframing
- › Sharing about yourself
- › Empathy and compassion
- › Handling misinformation

Section 4 - Conclusion

This section provides a conclusion and some closing thoughts on meaningful communication.

**Preparing
for Hard
Conversations**



Preparing for hard conversations with people under the influence of psychological manipulation (PM) and coercive control (CC) requires both empathy and flexibility. Going into these discussions with an open mind can make a big difference. Here are some reflection questions you should ask yourself before going into a difficult conversation.

What do I think I know about this person and their situation?

Reflect on any assumptions you might hold about the person and their current experience. Understanding your beliefs about the situation can help you approach the conversation with an open mind. For instance, you may have insights into the challenges they're facing, but remember, these insights are based on your perspective and there is probably a lot of information you are missing.

How might I be wrong?

Being aware of potential biases and ways you could be wrong can create a more open and respectful conversation. Questioning your certainty around any aspect of their experience can prevent misunderstandings or unwelcome judgments.

How can I keep my mind open to learn new things?

Cultivate a mindset of curiosity and active listening, leaving room for insights and stories you might not anticipate. This openness helps build trust and signals to them that you're there to understand, not to impose a viewpoint. There is always something new to learn in every situation.



How can I let them surprise me?

When we hold too tightly to expectations, we might miss the nuances of their story. Allow them to share their experience without filling in the gaps. People often reveal unexpected resilience, thoughts, or feelings when given the chance.



How can I support them?

Support isn't about fixing; it's about being a grounded presence. Think about ways you can offer assistance without taking control. For instance, ask what kind of support they feel would be helpful, instead of assuming.

Asking 
Questions

Open Question vs. Closed Questions

Learning to ask open questions is vital. Open questions invite people to explore their feelings, thoughts, or experiences. These questions encourage reflection and give the speaker control over how much they share. Closed questions seek specific information and often lead to short answers. Closed questions are helpful for clarification but may feel controlling or restrictive if overused.

When supporting someone affected by PM and CC, it is essential to use closed questions minimally. To better understand closed vs open questions, let's explore what they look like.

Closed Questions

Often start with:

- › Do / Does
- › Is / Are / Was / Were
- › Have / Has
- › Can / Will / Would

These questions give short answers (like "yes" or "no") or a small piece of information.

They are suitable for getting facts but can pressure someone if they are overused.

They can easily lead to questions that feel like judgements.

Examples:

- › "Do you believe everything the leader/your partner says?"
- › "Is your family still in contact with you?"
- › "Can you leave if you want to?"

All of these questions are closed. They leave room for a yes or no answer and contain traces of judgement about a person's situation.

Open Questions

Often start with:

- › What
- › How
- › Why
- › Tell me about...
- › In what way..

These questions let people explain their thoughts or feelings in more detail.

They encourage conversations instead of just short answers.

Examples:

- › "What attracted you to this group/relationship?"
- › "How do you feel about your experience with the group/relationship so far?"
- › "How can I best support you right now?"

All of these questions are open. They move away from yes or no answers, and they aim to foster conversation and deeper sharing. They don't put pressure on the situation or make unstated judgements.

Open-Closed Questions

Some questions seem open but actually invite closed, shallow responses. A great example is the everyday question, "How are you?" Although it seems friendly, it often leads to quick, automatic replies like "Fine" or "Good." We hear and say it so often that it doesn't invite much thought or genuine sharing.

When engaging with someone under the influence of PM and CC, it's essential to choose your questions carefully. Thoughtful questions can foster trust, spark reflection, and gently encourage someone to open up. Varying your opening questions makes your conversation more inviting and less predictable, helping the person feel safe to explore their thoughts.

Sample questions to start a conversation:

- › “How are you feeling today?” (Encourages reflection on emotions.)
- › “What’s been on your mind recently?” (Broadens the scope of discussion.)
- › “What’s something you’ve enjoyed recently?” (Opens the door for a positive reflection.)

Embracing Complexity

People under the influence of PM and CC often experience conflicting emotions—feeling drawn to both the comfort of the group or relationship and the desire for freedom. Validating this ambivalence and complexity helps make them feel understood.

Nothing is black and white in these situations, there will always be good paired with bad. Making sure you recognize that is vital. Questions can be framed to show the many sides of the situation.

Examples:

- › “What’s something you appreciate about the group/relationship, and what feels hard about being part of it?”
- › “When you think about leaving, what feels exciting? What feels scary?”

Sample Opening Questions for Meaningful Conversations

These open questions are particularly useful when engaging with someone under the influence of PM and CC. They invite reflection without being intrusive or judgmental. Remember that some of the more in-depth and reflective questions should only be used if you have built trust and the person under the influence is ready for them.

Exploring emotions and experiences:

- › “How has being in the group/relationship affected your day-to-day life?”
- › “What has been the most rewarding part of your involvement/relationship?”

- › “How do you feel about the relationships you’ve built within the group?”
- › “What emotions come up when you think about your family or old friends?”
- › “Could you describe a time the group/relationship helped you through a challenge?”

Gently inviting self-reflection:

- › “What do you hope to achieve by being part of this group?”
- › “How do you feel the group’s beliefs align with your personal values?”
- › “What was it like when you first joined the group/entered the relationship?”
- › “What changes have you noticed in yourself since you got involved?”
- › “If someone new joined today, what advice would you give them?”

Encouraging them to think about alternatives:

- › “What do you imagine life would be like if you weren’t in the group/relationship?”
- › “In what ways has the group/relationship met your expectations? In what ways has it not?”
- › “What other communities have you been part of before this group?”
- › “What would you want to do if you had more time outside the group/relationship?”

SECTION 03

Listening



Listening is vital when engaging with someone who is under the influence of PM and CC. Effective listening is more than just hearing words—it involves setting aside assumptions and being fully present. The goal is to create an environment of trust where the person feels safe enough to share their experience honestly. Non-judgmental listening and asking the right questions can uncover valuable insights about the person’s inner thoughts, creating more understanding and connection.

Be Non-Judgmental and Let Go of Assumptions

Even though you may have opinions about the situation—whether you think the person is in a toxic group or relationship—you need to let go of preconceived ideas and make space for their perspective. Everyone’s experience is unique, and what seems obvious to you may not be how they experience things.

For example, you may believe someone should leave a high-control group immediately, but they may feel the group gives them a sense of purpose. **Try asking questions like:**

- › “What do you love about being part of this group/relationship?”
- › “What role does this group/relationship play in your life?”

When you ask these questions, really listen to the answers. Try to find the positives in their experiences. Engaging with the positives can help them feel more understood and create a stronger connection.

By understanding the positives, it becomes easier to avoid assuming you know what’s best for them—sometimes, they need to explore their situation before making decisions. Your job is to create a space where they feel seen and heard, not forced into a particular conclusion.

Drop the Ego and Get Curious

It's important to acknowledge that people under the influence of PM and CC may hurt others, often unintentionally. They might parrot hurtful opinions from the group or reflect the manipulative thinking they've absorbed. They could express hateful beliefs or say things that hurt your feelings. Feeling frustrated or upset is natural, but the key is responding with gentle curiosity rather than defensiveness.

For example, they might say:

- › "You've always been against me and never understood."
- › "You're just part of the problem like everyone else."

In moments like this, it's important to let insults bounce off you without being a pushover. You can acknowledge your feelings without letting your ego take over. **For instance, you might respond:**

- › "That was hard to hear, but I care about you and want to understand what you're going through."
- › "I can see you're upset, and I want to talk through this with you, but let's be kind to each other."

Setting boundaries is also essential—taking space from mean behaviour to protect yourself is okay, but ultimately, dropping your ego allows you to truly listen and engage. When you avoid taking things personally, you can ask better questions and encourage more sharing, which is the foundation of building trust.

Remember, much of the time if someone you care about is saying negative or hateful things because of the influence of PM and CC, it is not their authentic thoughts. It is more often than not a reflection of their manipulator. Even though it hurts, if you can keep that in mind it will be much easier to stay engaged and compassionate.

Pick Up Threads to Show You're Listening

Think of listening like weaving or braiding a thread. As you listen, you're trying to pick up threads from what the person says and weave them back into the conversation. This signals that you're paying attention and care about what they share. It also keeps the conversation flowing and helps you form thoughtful follow-up questions to deepen the dialogue.

For example:

- › If they say, "I joined the group because it gave me a sense of belonging."
- › You could respond: "That sounds really important. What is it about the group that makes you feel so connected?"
- › If they mention, "I'm struggling with whether this relationship is still right for me."
- › You might follow up with: "What are the things that feel right, and what feels difficult right now?"

By picking up on key themes or emotions, you keep the conversation on track and make the person feel heard. This also helps you ask more open-ended questions that invite deeper reflection.

Treat the Person as the Expert in Their Own Life

One of the most important aspects of listening is to treat the person as the expert on their own life. Even if you care deeply about them, you don't always know what's best. They are the ones living their experience, and with patience and trust, they can uncover their own answers for what they need. Your role is not to fix things for them but to support them in finding their own path.

Helpful questions that treat the person as the expert include:

- › "How can I best support you right now?"

- › “What do you usually do to support yourself when things are hard?”
- › “What do you need most from me or others?”
- › “How do you see your relationship right now?”
- › “What would make you feel safe right now?”

These questions show that you trust the person’s ability to reflect and make decisions. You are also signalling that their needs and insights are valuable, strengthening your connection and building trust over time.

Avoiding Fix-It Mode

One of the most common traps is feeling the urge to “solve” the other person’s problem or offer advice. While your intentions are good, unsolicited advice can feel dismissive and make them shut down. Instead, focus on empowering the person to come to their own conclusions.

For example:

- › Rather than saying, “You should leave the group/relationship,” you could ask:
- › “What do you think your options are?”
- or
- › “What would feel like the right next step for you?”

This helps the person reflect on their choices without pressure or expectations from you.

The Importance of Silence

In addition to asking thoughtful questions, silence is a powerful tool. Many people feel the need to fill conversational gaps because it can feel awkward, but silence can encourage the person to reflect and elaborate. Sitting in silence shows that you’re not rushing the conversation and are comfortable giving them the space to think. You can say, “Take your time; I’m here to listen,” to signal that they don’t need to respond immediately.

For example:

After asking, “What has been on your mind recently?” allow the person time to sit with the question. If they don’t respond immediately, it’s okay. Trust that they are processing, and let the quiet show your patience.

Body Language and Non-Verbal Listening

Listening is not just about words. Paying attention to body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions can provide important clues about what the person feels but may struggle to say. Listening means both hearing the words and paying attention to body language.

For example:

If someone lowers their voice or looks uncomfortable when talking about certain aspects of the group or relationship they are a part of, you can gently acknowledge it: “I noticed your voice changed/you seemed uncomfortable when you mentioned that. What’s coming up for you when you talk about that?”

Additionally, be sure to use encouraging non-verbal cues like nodding, leaning in slightly, or soft eye contact to show engagement.

Clarifying and Reframing Statements

Sometimes, people struggle to express what they’re going through clearly. As a listener, you can gently rephrase their statements to show that you understand—and to invite them to elaborate. This is called reflective listening. Reflective listening is an active process where you restate or paraphrase what the other person has said. This not only shows that you are paying attention but also helps clarify their thoughts.

For example:

- › If they say, “I just feel stuck,” you might respond: “It sounds like you’re feeling trapped. What would it look like for you to feel free?”

This both validates their feelings and gently nudges them toward deeper reflection.

- › If they say, “I don’t know what to do,” you might respond, “It sounds like you’re feeling uncertain about your options. Can we explore that together?”

This technique reinforces trust and encourages deeper engagement.

Sharing About Yourself

If the person isn’t opening up, sometimes sharing a little about your own experiences can help keep the conversation going. This can build trust, empower them, and even encourage reflection on their own situation.

- › **Be Open and Genuine:** Share parts of yourself freely, as you feel comfortable. Letting them see your own humanity can create a sense of connection.
- › **Ask for Their Advice:** Empower them by inviting their perspective on something in your life. If trust is already established, consider discussing situations that subtly intersect with theirs, which could encourage them to think critically and reflect on their own experiences.
- › **Avoid Sensitive Triggers:** Be mindful not to mention things that could directly touch on their current situation or cause them distress. The goal is to invite their engagement and reflection without pushing them toward topics they may find too challenging.

Empathy and Compassion

While questions create openings, listening and empathy solidifies trust. It’s important to acknowledge the emotional weight the person might carry, even if you don’t fully understand it. Remember to acknowledge and express empathy for their positive and negative emotions. People trying to lend support often focus on the negative only, but that is not helpful as it discounts

the positive and may make someone feel misunderstood or not supported.

Example Phrases to Express Empathy:

- › “It sounds like that’s been so hard for you.”
- › “That sounds like an amazing experience.”
- › “That must be overwhelming—thank you for sharing that with me.”
- › “I can’t imagine how challenging that must feel!”
- › “I’m happy you find such joy in that.”

These simple acknowledgments can go a long way in making someone feel validated and supported.

Note on self-compassion: Practicing self-compassion is essential when listening to someone influenced by PM and CC. As you support others, remember to extend kindness to yourself, acknowledging that these conversations can be emotionally taxing. Don’t be too hard on yourself if you feel overwhelmed or get frustrated. You can always take a break and come back to it when you are feeling recharged.

Handling Misinformation and Uncomfortable Beliefs

When someone expresses ideas influenced by manipulation (e.g., conspiracy theories or harmful beliefs), it’s important not to confront them directly, as this could create defensiveness. Instead, adopt a stance of curiosity and reflection.

For example:

- › If they say, “The world is run by a secret group of elites,” you could respond: “That sounds like a heavy thing to believe. What draws you to that idea?”

This kind of response validates their experience without agreeing or dismissing it, which leaves space for dialogue. The goal when in conversation with someone with overwhelming beliefs

should always be to understand them, find common ground, and then you can build trust to the point of gently challenging the belief through open-minded questions.



Bringing It All Together


Listening is essential, especially when someone is under the influence of PM and CC. Setting aside judgment, dropping your ego, and practicing curiosity and empathy creates the space needed for meaningful conversations. Picking up threads from their responses helps keep the conversation moving forward and shows that you care. Asking open-ended questions and practicing reflective listening helps them think about their experiences in a safe way.

Remember that you don't have all the answers—the person you're talking to holds the key to their own life. With patience, trust, and thoughtful listening, you can foster a deeper connection, support them through their struggles, and empower them to find their way forward at their own pace.

Conclusion



The art of asking good questions and listening deeply is about creating a conversation, not staging an intervention. The goal is to make the person feel heard, understood, and respected. Your role is to walk alongside them, not pull them in a direction you think they should go. Over time, these meaningful conversations can empower them to explore their feelings, question their circumstances, and discover their own path to healing and freedom.



You become a supportive presence in their life through empathy, curiosity, and patience—someone who offers connection without judgment. Even in difficult conversations, your willingness to ask questions and truly listen can make a profound difference.

Remember, this journey requires patience and persistence. Growth takes time and effort, and you may find that it asks more of you than you initially expected. But change is possible, and every step you take—becoming a more attentive listener, asking more thoughtful questions—will benefit you in countless ways. Your personal growth will not only set a positive example for the person you're supporting but will also deepen and enrich all your relationships, beyond this one.

If you need more information or support visit www.thecounterproject.org for toolkits, resources and access to our peer support services.