

Toolkit for Safe Seeking

→ Finding Healthy
Community,
Connection &
Purpose



**Toolkit for Safe Seeking
Finding Healthy Community, Connection & Purpose**

Version 1.0 June 19, 2024

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Introduction

We are all looking for something. A sense of community, connection and purpose is vital to our flourishing, but it can be hard to find. Approaching new groups or relationships can be challenging, especially given the threat of psychological manipulation (PM) and coercive control (CC). From hate groups to conspiracy, high-control groups to sex trafficking and intimate partner controlling relationships, the tactics of PM and CC permeate our social world and cause harm through various means. Damaging groups or manipulators are often hard to spot and frequently hide in plain sight. So it is up to us, as seekers, to prepare ourselves and develop skills and resilience to counter manipulation and stay safe as we explore new opportunities and connections.

This toolkit acts as a guide for finding safe pathways to healthy community, connection and purpose. This information can be used with our other toolkits to foster a deeper understanding of PM and CC and help work towards countering, prevention and recovery.

Our toolkits include:

- › [Toolkit for Identifying & Countering Psychological Manipulation & Coercive Control](#) (For mental health practitioners)
- › [Toolkit for Recovery from Psychological Manipulation & Coercive Control](#) (For mental health practitioners)
- › [Red Flags List](#)
- › [Toolkit for Helping Your Loved Ones](#)
- › [Toolkit for Helping Youth](#)



Section Guide

Section 1 - Defining and Differentiating PM and CC: Define and differentiate psychological manipulation and coercive control.

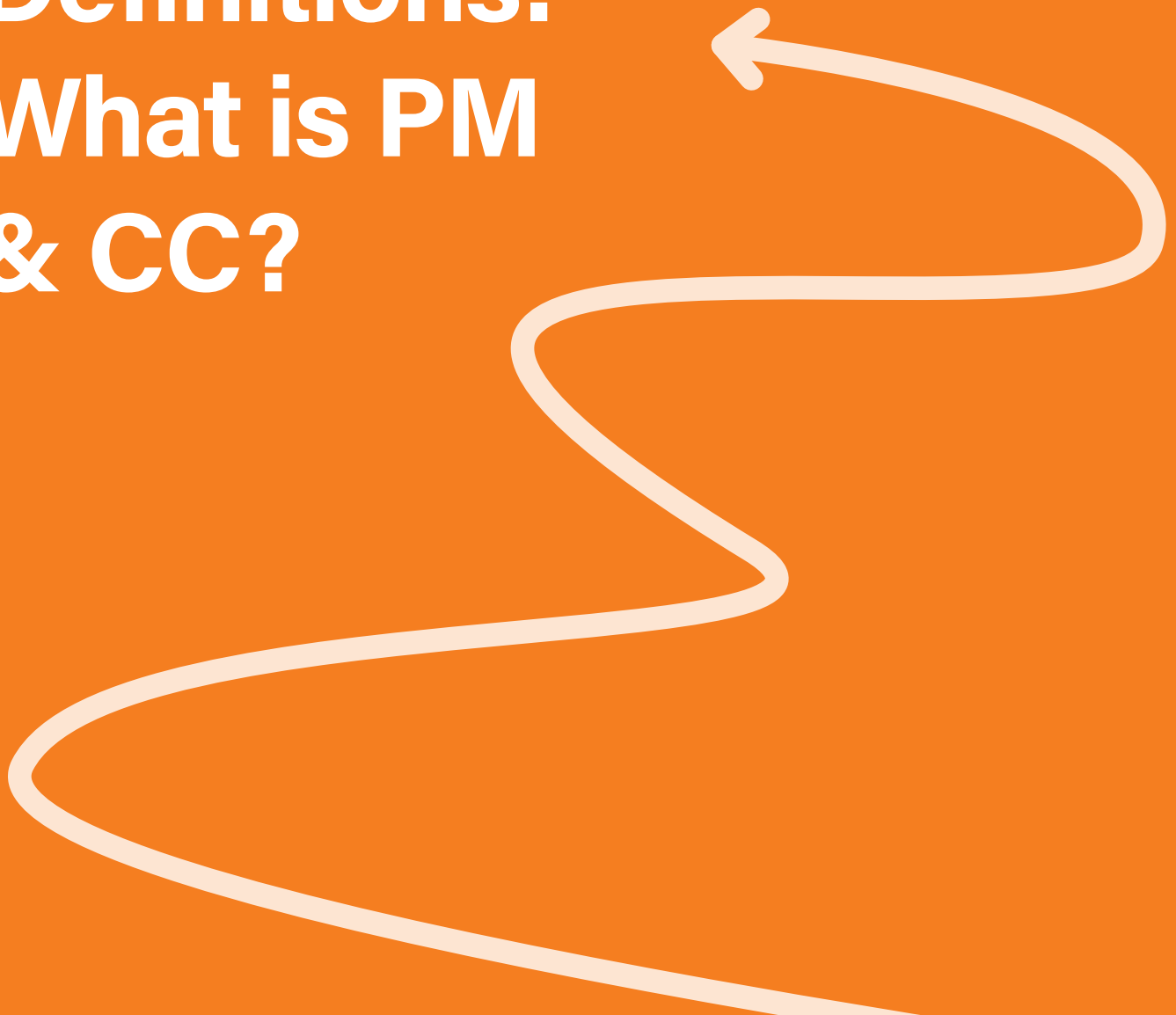
Section 2 - Understanding Motivations: Gain insights into people's motivations to seek connection and purpose within manipulative environments.

Section 3 - Steps to Safe Seeking: Explore five steps to safe seeking - Look Into It, Develop Firm Boundaries, Feel it Out, Stay Vigilant and Get Out if Necessary.

Section 4 - Green Flags: Learn about the green flags for healthy groups and relationships.

Section 5 - Conclusion: Concluding comments.

**Definitions:
What is PM
& CC?**



Psychological Manipulation (PM)

To understand what you might be walking into when seeking safe communities, connections and purpose (CCP), it is important to get a better sense of psychological manipulation and coercive control overall. In the next two sections, we will explore the definitions of PM and CC and the motivations for involvement with manipulative groups and relationships.

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
- › Control of diet, sleep, clothing, sex life and social life

Psychological manipulation tactics are used in a variety of circumstances, including religious, political or ideological high-control groups (cults), 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 someone might seek power over others or to make money from them.

Coercive Control (CC)

Coercive control is a pattern of actions aimed at isolating, humiliating, exploiting, or asserting dominance over a person.

These tactics may include:

- › Emotional abuse
- › Verbal abuse
- › Litigation abuse*
- › Financial abuse, such as obstructing someone's ability to attend work or school or restricting their financial resources
- › Gaslighting**
- › Intimidation
- › Belittlement

Coercive control is usually associated with intimate partner controlling relationships, but similar tactics are used in other manipulative situations, including religious, political, or ideological high-control groups, familial abuse, friend relationships, and human trafficking.

***Note:** Litigation abuse is the strategic use of legal proceedings to cause emotional harm and maintain control over a person. This could include filing repetitive or pointless lawsuits, exploiting legal processes to harass someone, and creating fear and uncertainty through the legal system.

****Note:** Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation where the manipulator seeks to sow seeds of doubt in someone, making them question their own perceptions, memory, or sanity. The gaslighter often uses tactics like denial, misinformation, or selective lies to undermine the person's confidence and create a distorted reality.



Why Differentiate?

It is important to differentiate between the terms because PM is not directly regulated or recognized by governments or the law. PM will often be identified and addressed in relation to other crimes resulting from PM, such as fraud, human trafficking or sexual abuse. However, CC is gaining recognition within legal systems and is being adopted into policy in many countries, primarily relating to intimate partner violence and laws related to children and families.

These legal differences are important to remember if you end up in legal entanglement due to your involvement with a manipulative group or relationship.

SECTION 02



Understanding Motivations

To understand involvement with manipulative groups and relationships, it's good to understand motivations first. Motivations for involvement can vary, but here, we will cover three key motivations, which are universal and highly relatable.

Here, we highlight three key motivations:

- › Community
- › Connection
- › Purpose



Community

Human beings are naturally social. We are biologically wired to live in small, tight-knit communities. Only recently in our history have we come to see autonomy and self-reliance as things to strive for. However, living independently is not what we are built for, and the loneliness it causes has become an epidemic¹. 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 manipulative groups in search of the sense of community they crave. These groups often create a close-knit environment that promotes a shared commitment to a higher purpose, offering people a place to feel acknowledged and validated. These groups often assume the role of a surrogate family ("chosen family"), extending resources, emotional support, solidarity and a profound sense of inclusion. This appeal of a seemingly supportive community is attractive to a wide range of people, particularly those dealing with feelings of isolation and detachment or those experiencing life changes and seeking support.



Connection

Although we are seemingly Although we are seemingly always connected by our technology, 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 connecting with 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, there is some connection to something emotional, spiritual, secret, powerful or romantic. This sense of connection can appeal to many people, especially those feeling lonely, disconnected, powerless or disenfranchised.

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



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 lot of knowledge and understanding to make an impact. This desire for direction leaves us open to influence. Manipulative groups and individuals often promise a sense of purpose, either explicitly or implicitly. High-control groups of all kinds, 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 and sex traffickers 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.

Now that we understand what you might be looking for when seeking community, connection and purpose, let's talk about the steps to safe seeking.

SECTION 03

Steps to Safe Seeking





Step 1: Look Into It

If you are invited into a new group or meet a new person who is exciting to you, take a moment and look them up. Use the name of the group or person. If you don't know what they are called or what their name is, try searching keywords associated with them. These could be things they have said or people or ideas they mentioned. Sometimes, high-control groups or individuals recruit without stating the name of their group, as they know that people will recognize them and be suspicious. The goal is understanding what you are walking into and what to expect. Sometimes, high-control groups have more public-facing fronts with good reputations to hide the inner circles that are more damaging. When searching for a group or individual, you should go beyond the first page of a Google search to ensure you aren't missing anything.

You could also try pairing your search with keywords. This would look like:

- › (Name of group or individual) abuse
- › (Name of group or individual) manipulation
- › (Name of group or individual) coercion
- › (Name of group or individual) cult
- › (Name of group or individual) trafficking
- › (Name of group or individual) hate group

This will reveal any articles, blog posts, Reddit posts, etc., about the group or individual. When looking at this information, there are two key things to take into consideration:

Fringe complaints should be taken seriously: No matter how obscure, even if buried in a subReddit you had to dig for, red flags should be heeded. Groups or individuals looking to exploit others often operate subtly, making their actions hard to spot and report. Paying attention is crucial if you encounter someone online speaking out about mistreatment within a group or relationship. This doesn't mean you can't proceed with involvement, but you should remain vigilant for red flags and be prepared to walk away if necessary. The nature of the complaint matters. It might not be significant if it's a general discomfort or a minor disagreement. However, serious allegations such as trafficking or involvement in hate groups or cults demand serious consideration and caution.

The boy who cried cult: ‘Cult’ is a term tossed around frequently these days, often used by those with grievances against individuals or groups, labelling them as abusive, manipulative, or narcissistic. With the rise of social media advice on trauma and hate speech, it’s become challenging to distinguish between genuine disagreements and actual abuse. We must learn to distinguish the signs of manipulative behaviour and coercive control from dysfunctional relationships or group dynamics. While paying attention to fringe opinions is important, knowing when to put them aside and proceed safely with a group or relationship is equally vital. Throughout this toolkit, we’ll unravel these distinctions to help you navigate toward healthy communities, connections, and purpose.

Step 2: Develop Firm Boundaries

Groups and relationships that are abusive and manipulative will make many demands on your time and life. Because of this, before joining a group or entering into a new relationship, it’s important to define your boundaries and what you are willing to give. You should practice remaining firm about those boundaries.

Here are some initial questions to consider when developing your boundaries:

- › What would make me feel safe and confident in a new group or relationship?
- › Whose advice do I trust if I become uncertain about things in a new group or relationship?
- › How much time am I willing to give to a new relationship or group?
- › Am I willing to spend money on my new group or relationship? If so, how much?
- › What behaviours do I consider abusive?
- › How can I learn to trust my gut when interacting with others?
- › Am I confident about who I am and what I have to give to a new group or relationship?
- › What kind of treatment am I not willing to tolerate?
- › How will I recognize when I am being treated poorly?
- › Do I have an exit plan in case this group or relationship is not what I thought?

Boundaries and limitations are important when approaching a new group or relationship. Here are some boundaries

to consider creating before approaching a new group or relationship:

- › **Emotional Needs:** Ensure your feelings, needs, and opinions are respected in the new group or relationship.
- › **Time Considerations:** Respect your own time. Do not feel obligated to participate in activities or spend time with others if it conflicts with your personal schedule or needs.
- › **Physical Limitations:** Protect your personal space and body. Ensure physical interactions are consensual and comfortable for you.
- › **Pace of Relationship:** Allow the relationship to progress at a comfortable pace. Avoid rushing into intimacy or deep commitments to a group or individual.
- › **Independence:** Maintain your independence. Ensure you have time for yourself and other relationships outside the new group or relationship.
- › **Decision-Making:** Always retain your ability to make personal decisions. Avoid situations where you feel pressured to conform to other people's expectations or decisions.
- › **Honesty and Transparency:** Foster open and honest communication. Ensure that you can express your thoughts and concerns without fear of retribution.
- › **Conflict Resolution:** Address conflicts healthily and respectfully. Avoid relationships where conflicts are ignored or handled with aggression or all blame is put on you.
- › **Respect for Limits:** Make sure your limits are respected. If you set a boundary, the group or individual should acknowledge and uphold it.
- › **Accountability:** Ensure everyone, including yourself, is accountable for their actions. Avoid relationships where manipulation, blame-shifting, or excessive denial occurs.
- › **Privacy:** Respect your own and others' privacy. Do not feel obligated to share more than you are comfortable with.
- › **Exclusion:** Be wary of groups or relationships that demand exclusivity or create a strong us-versus-them mentality.
- › **Financial Independence:** Maintain your financial independence. Avoid groups or relationships that ask for large financial investments.
- › **External Support:** Connecting with trusted friends, family, or professionals who can offer an outside perspective on the new relationship or group is vital.
- › **Check-Ins:** Regularly evaluate the health of the relationship or group dynamics with trusted connections outside of it.

Step 3: Feel it Out

After searching for red flags online and developing firm boundaries, you might be ready to take your first steps toward a new group or relationship. This involves being open while still listening to your gut and being mindful of your boundaries.

When feeling it out, take inventory of your initial impressions and watch for warning signs. Warning signs can be found in this toolkit, but also in Counter's [Red Flags List](#).

Here is a quick reference summary of some warning signs to watch for with expanded versions below:

Quick Reference

Black-and-White Thinking or Easy Answers to Complex Problems - Be wary of groups that offer overly simplistic solutions to complex issues, as manipulators often use black-and-white thinking and false promises to create dependency and control.

Complex Rules or Hierarchy - Be cautious of groups with overly complex or opaque rules and hierarchies, as these can be tactics to control and confuse members.

Contracts or NDAs - Be wary of signing anything that restricts your freedom to leave or talk about your experiences, as contracts or NDAs (Non-Disclosure Agreements) can control and silence you within a group or relationship.

Criticism of Connections - Be cautious of groups or individuals who criticize your friends and family, as this can be a tactic to isolate you and make you more dependent on them.

Gaslighting & Blame-Shifting - Beware if you find yourself frequently blamed for problems or made to doubt your own perceptions and experiences—this could be a form of gaslighting.

Growth Through Discomfort - Watch out for groups or individuals who promote growth through excessive discomfort or hardship, as that could be a way to encourage you to stay in an abusive situation.

Hate-Filled Rhetoric - Be wary of any group that promotes hatred, whether overt or subtle, as it is unhealthy and dangerous.

Insistance on the Immediate Next Meeting - Be cautious if you're pressured to meet frequently and immediately, as healthy relationships respect your time and commitments. Manipulative groups or individuals may dominate your schedule early on to isolate you and increase your dependence on them.

Instant Demand for Openness or Vulnerability - Be cautious if you are pressured to share personal details immediately, as true relationships build trust over time. Manipulative groups or individuals often collect intimate information early on to use for control later.

Instant, Overwhelming Connection - Beware of an instant, overwhelming connection, especially if driven by a new group or partner, as it could indicate manipulative intent later on.

Love-Bombing - Beware of excessive praise, flattery, and gifts early in a relationship, as they may be tactics to lower your defences and foster dependency.

Overly Charismatic Leader - Be cautious of leaders who appear too good to be true, whose authority cannot be questioned, who are idolized by followers or who make grandiose claims without accountability, as these traits can signal manipulative behaviour.

Pressure to Invest - Beware of any immediate or substantial demands for financial, emotional, or spiritual investments or investments of time or labour, as they may indicate manipulative tactics.

Special or Confusing Language - Watch out for exclusive jargon or language only insiders understand, as it can foster dependency and control and may create a sense of exclusivity and dependence on leaders for interpretation.

Strong Ideology - Beware of groups with rigid beliefs that discourage questioning, create pressure to conform or embrace new ideology and promote an us-versus-them mentality.

Therapy Feeling in a Non-Therapeutic Context - Be wary if group interactions resemble therapy sessions without professional oversight. Be on the lookout for pressures to share personal issues or emotions, as both trained therapists and non-professionals can exploit therapeutic dynamics for control or manipulation.

Deeper Dive Here is a more in-depth look at the warning signs of manipulation:

Black-and-White Thinking or Easy Answers to Complex Problems

Life is complicated, and things aren't always simple. Manipulators often provide easy answers or reduce the world to black and white. Beware of groups offering quick fixes to deep and complicated issues.

This might look like:

- › Promoting overly simplistic solutions to complex personal, social, or global problems.
- › Claiming that a single method, belief, or practice can solve diverse and nuanced issues.
- › Ignoring or dismissing the complexity of issues, reducing them to black-and-white terms.
- › Promising immediate or miraculous results without acknowledging the effort, time, and complexity involved in real change.
- › Leaders or members making charismatic, confident promises of easy success, happiness, or enlightenment.
- › Promises of truth, revelation, true love or prosperity that seem too good to be true.

These tactics can create false hope and dependency, making you more vulnerable to manipulation and disappointment when the promised quick fixes fail to deliver. Healthy groups and relationships acknowledge the complexity of issues and support realistic, thoughtful, and nuanced approaches to problem-solving.

Complex Rules or Hierarchy

A healthy group should have clear, fair, and understandable guidelines that promote transparency and inclusivity. When rules and hierarchy become overly complex or opaque, it can be used to control and confuse members by creating power imbalances and discouraging questioning of authority.

This could look like:

- › Rules that are not clearly defined or consistently enforced.
- › An excessive amount of rules, especially ones that seem unnecessary or invasive.
- › A complex hierarchy that is not justified or explained.
- › Harsh penalties or consequences for small infractions without clear justification.
- › Important decisions made behind closed doors without input from all members.

Complex rules and hierarchies can be used to assert control over your behaviour, thoughts, and interactions within the group. In healthy communities, guidelines are transparent and reasonable and serve collective well-being.

Contracts or NDAs

Be wary of signing anything restricting your freedom to leave or talk about your experiences. Contracts or Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) can be used to control and silence you within a group or relationship.

This might look like:

- › Agreements that prevent you from discussing your experiences, beliefs, or interactions with others outside the group.
- › Clauses that impose harsh consequences, such as legal action or financial penalties, for breaching the contract or NDA.
- › Ambiguous or broadly defined language, potentially extending the scope of confidentiality beyond reasonable expectations.
- › Being asked to sign a contract or NDA without sufficient time to thoroughly review and understand its terms.

These tactics can create a culture of secrecy and isolation, preventing you from seeking support or sharing concerns with trusted friends, family, or professionals. Healthy relationships and organizations prioritize transparency, trust, and respect for individual rights, ensuring that agreements are clear, fair, and mutually agreed upon.

Criticism of Connections

One of the key manipulative tactics is isolation. This is often done through criticism of connections where the group or manipulator attempts to turn you against your friends and family.

This might look like:

- › Leaders or members making negative comments about your friends, family, or other connections outside the group.
- › Encouraging you to distance yourself from supportive relationships while protecting your commitment to the group.
- › Casting doubt on the intentions or loyalty of your loved ones.
- › Comparing your relationships unfavourably to those within the group by implying that others are less supportive or understanding.
- › Labelling your friends and family as evil, bad, wrong or manipulative.

These tactics can undermine your external support network, making you more reliant on the group for social validation and emotional support. Healthy groups and relationships encourage positive connections and respect for existing relationships instead of trying to fracture bonds.

Gaslighting & Blame-Shifting

Be cautious if you find yourself frequently blamed for problems or made to doubt your own perceptions and experiences—this could be a form of gaslighting and is a common manipulative tactic.

This might look like:

- › Being told that your perceptions, memories, or experiences are inaccurate or wrong despite evidence to the contrary.
- › Regularly being blamed for issues or problems within the group or relationship, even when you are not responsible.
- › Your valid concerns or feelings are dismissed or trivialized, making you feel unreasonable or overly sensitive.
- › Manipulating facts or events to make you doubt your own understanding of what happened.
- › Feeling like you can't do anything right, with every mistake or misstep being pointed out and used against you.

These tactics can erode your self-confidence and make you more dependent on the manipulator for validation and approval. Healthy relationships foster mutual respect, accountability, and open communication, where all involved take responsibility for their actions and feelings.

Growth Through Discomfort

Be cautious of groups or individuals who promote growth through excessive discomfort or hardship.

This might look like:

- › Encouraging you to endure emotional, physical, or psychological discomfort as a means of personal growth.
- › Ignoring or dismissing personal boundaries to push you outside your comfort zone.
- › Normalizing and glorifying difficult or painful experiences without adequate support or consideration for your well-being.
- › Praising those who endure discomfort or hardship as evidence of commitment or progress within the group.
- › Creating challenges or tasks that deliberately cause distress or harm under the guise of personal development.

These tactics can exploit vulnerability and undermine well-being under the pretense of personal growth. Healthy growth involves challenges that are respectful of individual boundaries, supportive of well-being and fostered in an environment of trust and consent.

Hate-Filled Rhetoric

Any group that promotes hatred, whether overt or subtle, is unhealthy and dangerous.

This might look like:

- › Openly expressing hatred or hostility toward specific people or groups based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or other characteristics.
- › Using coded language to promote discriminatory ideas or attitudes subtly.
- › Blaming specific groups or individuals for broader societal

- problems or using stereotypes to justify negative attitudes.
- › Encouraging or justifying violence, harm, or exclusion against targeted groups or people.

Emphasizing differences and fostering division rather than promoting understanding, inclusion, and unity.

These tactics can create an environment of fear, intolerance, and division. Healthy groups and relationships promote respect, inclusion, and understanding, valuing diversity and condemning hatred.

Instant Demand for Openness or Vulnerability

Be cautious if you are pressured to share personal details right away in a group or relationship. Manipulative groups or individuals often collect as much information as possible about people early on to use for manipulative purposes later. If you are being asked to confess secrets, share intimate details of your life, or reveal past trauma or personal struggles, this can be an early warning sign of manipulation.

This might look like:

- › Being made to feel like you must share personal details because everyone else is, and you will not be accepted if you don't.
- › Being told that the only way to achieve growth is by sharing your innermost self.
- › Being told it is "part of the process" to confess or reveal secrets.

These tactics can create a false sense of intimacy and dependency, making it easier for the group or individual to manipulate you. Trust should be built gradually, and sharing personal information should be based on mutual respect and comfort over time.

Instant, Overwhelming Connection

While feeling a strong connection can be natural and wonderful, an instant and overwhelming connection, especially if driven by the new group or partner, can be a sign of manipulation. Be wary if this connection feels too intense too quickly. Look out for feelings of extreme euphoria or excitement that could cloud

your judgment about the reality of the situation. Also, watch for people who seem to know a lot about you immediately. They could just be engaging in [cold reading](#).

In situations where there is an instant or overwhelming connection, you might say to yourself or hear others say:

- › “I’ve never felt this way about anybody/anything before.”
- › “This felt so powerful.”
- › “I felt instantly connected.”
- › “I got an amazing vibe.”
- › “You have to experience this.”
- › “This will change your life.”
- › “I’ve never met anyone like this before.”
- › “This person is so special/magical/real.”
- › “You need this.”

These statements can indicate that emotions are being heightened to create a sense of dependency and urgency, which can hinder your ability to evaluate the situation critically. Take a step back, allow time for the relationship to develop naturally, and maintain awareness of your own feelings and boundaries.

Insistence on the Immediate Next Meeting

If you are pressured to meet frequently and immediately, it can be a tactic to control your time and isolate you from other influences. Immediately (or even gradually) dominating your time, asking for more, and a group or individual trying to fill your schedule can be warning signs of manipulative behaviour.

This might look like:

- › Constantly being asked to meet up, sometimes even daily, with little regard for your personal schedule or commitments.
- › Being pressured to drop other plans or commitments to meet immediately or on short notice.
- › Meetings that go on for hours, often longer than originally planned, making it difficult to attend to other aspects of your life.
- › Feeling guilty or being made to feel guilty for not being able to attend a meeting or for needing time for yourself or other relationships.
- › Your calendar being filled with activities, meetings, or events

related to the group or individual, leaving little to no free time.

These tactics can isolate you from other influences and make you more dependent on the group or individual. Healthy relationships respect your time, personal space, and other commitments, allowing for a balanced and diverse social life.

Love-Bombing

Excessive praise, flattery, and gifts early on can be a tactic to lower your defences and create dependency. Be wary of anyone who expresses over-the-top affection or devotion prematurely.

This might look like:

- › Receiving expensive gifts early on in the relationship.
- › Hearing “I love you” at an early stage.
- › Statements like “I’ve never met anyone like you before.”
- › Being showered with excessive praise or compliments by a group or individual.

These actions can create a false sense of intimacy and obligation, making it harder to recognize manipulative behaviour. Healthy relationships develop slowly based on mutual respect and care over time.

Overly Charismatic Leaders and Unquestionable Authority

Be cautious of leaders who seem too good to be true and whose authority cannot be questioned. These traits can be red flags for manipulative behaviour.

This might look like:

- › Leaders who are idolized or worshipped by group members, creating a sense of infallibility.
- › Leaders who use charm and charisma to attract and maintain followers, often seeming too good to be true.
- › Leaders making grandiose promises or claims about their abilities, vision, or mission.
- › Leaders or members who react defensively or aggressively to any form of questioning or criticism.
- › Leaders who are not held accountable for their actions and decisions, creating an environment where they can act

- without oversight.
- › A group culture that discourages or punishes dissent, promoting blind obedience and conformity.
 - › Important decisions made solely by the leader(s) without input or transparency from the broader group.
 - › Leaders who are referred to as genius, enlightened, master, holy or in some way sacred, powerful or larger-than-life.
 - › Leaders who claim to have unbelievable supernatural powers.

These tactics can foster an environment of control and dependency, where the leader's authority is absolute, and you are discouraged from thinking critically or independently. Healthy groups and relationships value transparency, accountability, and open dialogue, ensuring that leaders are subject to the same scrutiny and standards as everyone else.

Pressure to Invest

Any pressure to make immediate, substantial financial, emotional, or spiritual investments should raise concerns.

This might look like:

- › Being asked to donate large sums of money, buy expensive materials, or invest in the group's projects or products.
- › Feeling pressured to devote significant time, energy, and emotional support to the group or relationship right from the start.
- › Being urged to quickly adopt the group's beliefs, practices, or rituals without sufficient time to understand and reflect on them.
- › Expectations to meet specific goals, such as recruiting new members or achieving certain levels of involvement, often accompanied by guilt or shame for not meeting them.
- › The group or individual creates a sense of urgency or scarcity, such as claiming that opportunities are limited or that immediate action is necessary for personal growth or well-being.
- › Tithing or expecting donations without accountability for where the money is going.

These tactics can create a sense of obligation and dependency, making it harder to critically assess the group's practices and

your level of involvement. Healthy relationships and groups allow for gradual commitment and respect for your autonomy, ensuring that investments are made voluntarily and thoughtfully.

Special or Confusing Language

Exclusive jargon or phrases that only people on the inside understand can be a way to create dependency and control.

This might look like:

- › Using specific phrases that are only understood if you are on the inside.
- › Giving new or altered meanings to common words to align with the group's ideology or beliefs.
- › Using intentionally complex or difficult-to-understand language makes you feel inadequate or dependent on leaders for clarification or explanation.
- › Encouraging or requiring members to communicate in ways that are not easily understood by outsiders.
- › Using mystical, esoteric, or pseudo-scientific terms that imply special knowledge or insight that only the group possesses.

These tactics can create a sense of exclusivity, making you feel special for understanding the language but also more dependent on the group for interpretation and meaning. Healthy groups and relationships use clear, inclusive language that promotes understanding and open communication.

Strong Ideology

Groups with rigid beliefs that do not tolerate questioning can be dangerous. Healthy communities allow for diverse opinions.

This might look like:

- › Promoting a strict set of beliefs as the absolute truth, leaving no room for questioning or alternative viewpoints.
- › Encouraging an us-verses-them mentality that creates a clear divide between those who adhere to the group's ideology and those who do not.
- › Discouraging or punishing people who question or challenge the group's beliefs or practices.

- › Asserting that the group or its leaders have exclusive access to the truth, wisdom, or enlightenment.
- › Pressuring members to conform to the group's ideological, religious, or political views, often through guilt, shame, or threats of social ostracism.

These tactics can limit your critical thinking ability, making you rely more on the group for guidance and validation. Healthy groups and relationships respect diverse perspectives, encourage open dialogue, and support your autonomy in forming your own beliefs.

Therapy Feeling in a Non-Therapeutic Context

Be cautious if interactions within a group or relationship start to resemble therapy sessions in a non-therapeutic setting.

This might look like:

- › Encouraging or requiring members to disclose personal issues or traumas without proper professional guidance or confidentiality.
- › Non-professionals or even trained therapists assuming the role of therapists outside of their professional capacity, offering psychological advice or interventions without appropriate qualifications or ethical boundaries.
- › Creating a dynamic where members rely heavily on the group or leader for emotional support or validation, similar to therapeutic relationships.
- › Blurring the lines between personal support and therapy, potentially exploiting vulnerabilities for group or leader benefit.
- › Feeling pressured to share intimate details or emotions as a prerequisite for acceptance or advancement within the group.

These dynamics can mimic therapeutic processes but lack the ethical standards, confidentiality, and professional oversight necessary for genuine therapeutic benefit. It's important to recognize that both trained therapists and non-professionals can engage in manipulative behaviour, using therapeutic dynamics to control or exploit others. Healthy groups and therapeutic relationships respect boundaries, encourage self-awareness, and support members without crossing ethical lines.



Step 4: Stay Vigilant

Once you've made a commitment to a group or relationship, it's important to remain vigilant and aware of any signs of manipulation or unhealthy dynamics. As you spend more time with the group or individual, new manipulative behaviours might become apparent that weren't present when you joined. Many high-control groups and individual manipulators keep heavily manipulative activities limited to the inner circle or wait until a person is invested before showing their "true colours."

Here are a few more manipulative tactics to be aware of once you become more involved in a group or relationship:

Putting ideology above individual needs: Groups or individuals that prioritize their beliefs over your personal well-being may pressure you to conform strictly to their ideology, disregarding your own values and autonomy.

Manifesting or The Law of Attraction: Some groups promote the belief that people attract negative outcomes through their thoughts or actions (e.g., "manifesting"). This can lead to blaming individuals for personal setbacks, fostering guilt and dependency on the group for solutions.

Aha moments: Manipulative groups or individuals may engineer "Aha moments" that make you feel solely responsible for solving problems or achieving enlightenment, reinforcing your dependence on their guidance. This tactic creates the illusion that breakthroughs are only possible within the group's environment, keeping you committed and feeling progress.

Secret keeping: Many high-control groups or individual manipulators encourage people to keep group activities or beliefs secret from outsiders, isolating them from external perspectives and support networks.

Demanding attendance: Typically, in high-control environments, demands for attendance will ramp up. Groups and relationships often require that you prioritize group events over significant personal events (like weddings or funerals). This isolates you from your support systems and reinforces dependence on the group or individual.

Moral compromises: Many manipulative groups or relationships will require you to engage in behaviours that go

against your moral or ethical principles, eroding your sense of self and integrity. This can lead to moral injury, where you suffer psychologically for actions you have taken that defied your morals.

Fundamental changes: Manipulative groups or individuals may demand fundamental changes to your identity, beliefs, or behaviours over time. Usually, friends and family are the first to spot these changes, so be mindful and listen if your social network is saying you have changed.

Limiting Access to Information: Manipulative groups or individuals may restrict access to outside information or alternative perspectives to control your beliefs and behaviours. Be careful if you find that information is selectively filtered or censored within the group, preventing you from making fully informed decisions. This could look like shunning ex-members to reduce communication, controlling which sources of information you can access, or presenting criticisms of the group or leader as false, evil, or misinformation.

Verbal abuse: Watch for verbal or emotional abuse where a manipulative group or individual tears down or belittles people to undermine their confidence and control their behaviour. This belittling usually takes time to manifest, as manipulators want to ensure buy-in before ramping up the abuse. This can come in many forms. It could look like name-calling, insults, or continuously telling you that you are a sinner, evil, bad or wrong and must atone or make amends in some way.

Although engaging, embracing and enjoying new relationships and activities is important, it is also vital to stay vigilant. Keep assessing your experiences within the group or relationship, trusting your instincts and seeking outside perspectives if things feel off.

Remember to maintain connections with friends, family, or professionals who can provide objective feedback and emotional support. If you suspect manipulative behaviour, keep a record of conversations, events, and requests made by the group or individual. These records can provide clarity and support if you decide to leave. This is especially helpful in situations that involve gaslighting, as you can be made to mistrust your own perceptions, and clear records will help you get a more objective

outside opinion.

Remember: It's always okay to re-evaluate your involvement with any group or relationship and prioritize your well-being. Recognizing manipulative tactics and taking steps to protect yourself is essential to staying safe in any group or relationship. Any healthy relationship will allow you to reassess and openly and honestly communicate concerns.

For more signs of psychological manipulation and coercive control, see Counter's [Red Flags List](#).

Step 5: Get Out if Necessary

Leaving once deeply invested in a group or relationship can be hard. This is true of any situation, not just manipulative ones. You may feel guilty abandoning a person or pursuit, or experiencing something called the [Sunk Cost Fallacy](#). This is where people tend to follow through on commitments if they've invested money, time, or effort, regardless of the benefits or drawbacks. But if you feel uncomfortable or notice any signs of manipulation, you need to be able to get out if necessary. Sometimes, you need to walk away; other times, you might need to run, but either way, you should plan to get out as safely and quickly as possible if you need to.

Here are some strategies to consider when leaving a manipulative or potentially manipulative group or relationship:

- › **Trust Your Instincts:** Listen to your gut feelings and intuition. It's important to take those feelings seriously if something feels off or uncomfortable.
- › **Seek Support:** Reach out to trusted friends, family members, or professionals who can provide emotional support and perspective. Having a support network can make the process less overwhelming.
- › **Educate Yourself:** Learn about manipulation tactics, cult dynamics, and signs of abusive relationships. Knowledge empowers you to recognize unhealthy patterns and make informed decisions.
- › **Set Boundaries:** Establish clear boundaries with the manipulative group or individual and stick to them. This includes limiting contact and refusing to engage in manipulative situations.

- › **Document Everything:** Keep records of communications, interactions, and incidents that show manipulation or abusive behaviour. Documentation can support you if you need to take legal action or clarify your feelings.
- › **Build Independence:** Work towards financial independence and cultivate hobbies, friendships, and activities outside the manipulative group or relationship. Doing this will create a soft landing for yourself when you are ready to leave.
- › **Stay Resilient:** Leaving a manipulative group or relationship can be extremely difficult. Practice self-care, resilience, and patience with yourself throughout the process.
- › **Consider Professional Help:** Seek guidance from organizations, therapists, social workers, or support groups specializing in recovery from manipulation or high-control experiences. See Counter's [Resource List](#) for more information.
- › **Stay Safe:** Prioritize your safety above all else. If you feel physically threatened or endangered, reach out to helplines or authorities or find a [police alternative](#) for immediate help.

Safety Planning

In cases where you might be in danger because of leaving a group or relationship, safety planning is vital. In manipulative or coercive intimate partner relationships, violence can occur if the manipulator feels they are losing control or that the relationship is threatened. In certain high-control or hate groups, you might be tracked, stalked or harassed if you decide to leave. If you can get professional help when making a safety plan, do so.

Here are some steps to consider when creating a safety plan:
Assess the Situation: Identify potential risks, threats, or obstacles you may face when leaving.

- › **Build a Support Network:** Reach out to friends, family, or trusted individuals who can provide emotional support and assistance. If social ties have been severed due to your involvement with the group or relationship, this may involve reconnecting and rebuilding relationships. If possible, connect with organizations, support groups, specialized counsellors, or helplines specializing in manipulation and abuse.
- › **Gather Information:** Look into legal rights and resources available for protection and assistance. Document any

- evidence of manipulation, abuse, or threats.
- › **Secure Financial Independence:** Assess your financial situation and explore options for financial independence, such as opening a separate bank account or securing a source of income.
 - › **Secure Essential Documents:** Gather important documents like identification, financial records, passports, and legal documents. Keep copies in a safe location.
 - › **Create a Safe Exit Plan:** Choose a safe time and place to leave, preferably when the manipulator or group is not present or aware. Plan your escape route and transportation to a safe location where you will be secure for a reasonable amount of time.
 - › **Communicate the Plan:** Inform your trusted support network about your decision to leave and share your safety plan. Come up with a code word or signal to alert your network if you are in danger or need immediate assistance.
 - › **Secure Online Presence:** Change passwords to all online accounts, including social media and email, to prevent unauthorized access. Use a secure device or private browsing mode when researching or communicating your plans.
 - › **Consider Legal Protection:** Obtain restraining or protection orders, if needed, to legally restrict the manipulator's access to you.
 - › **Pack Essentials:** Prepare an essentials list that includes clothing, medication, personal items, and important documents.
 - › **Notify Authorities:** Contact local law enforcement or an applicable hotline if you feel threatened or unsafe. Not all people feel safe or comfortable contacting the police in case of a threat. If that is the case, you could prepare a list of [police alternatives](#).
 - › **Maintain No-Contact:** If possible, cut off all communication with the manipulator and block their access once you have exited the group or relationship.
 - › **Monitor and Adjust:** Regularly review and adjust your safety plan based on changing circumstances.

Green Flags





Green Flags

In contrast to the red flags that signal potential manipulation or unhealthy dynamics within groups or relationships, green flags are positive indicators of healthy interactions and environments. Recognizing these green flags can empower you to develop relationships based on trust, respect, and genuine connection.

Here are some green flags to consider:

Open Communication: Healthy groups or relationships prioritize open and honest communication, where concerns and opinions are welcomed and respected.

Encouragement to Openly Evaluate the Situation: You are encouraged to critically assess your surroundings, beliefs, and experiences without fear of judgment or punishment.

Encouragement of Questioning/Dissent: There is a culture that supports questioning and embraces differing viewpoints, fostering intellectual growth and understanding.

Free to Leave at Any Point: You can exit the group or relationship without pressure, coercion, or negative consequences.

Respect Boundaries: Respect for personal boundaries is fundamental, with clear guidelines on acceptable and respectful behaviour.

Gradual Progression in Relationships: Relationships develop naturally, allowing you time to build trust and understanding before commitments deepen.

Detailed Information, Accountability, Transparency: Information is readily available, and decisions are made transparently, with accountability for actions and claims.

Substantiated Claims with Good Evidence: Assertions and claims are backed by reliable evidence, encouraging informed decision-making and critical thinking. Rhetoric or hyperbole is limited or non-existent.

Recognizing and valuing these green flags can help you to navigate relationships and group dynamics confidently. Creating environments that uphold these principles promotes healthy interactions built on trust and respect.

Conclusion



Navigating relationships and group dynamics can be complicated, especially when manipulation is involved. It's easy to read about these tactics on paper but far more difficult to navigate them in the moment. This topic is emotional, deep and personal. It's about one of the most fundamental things in human life—our relationships.

It is vital to be both vigilant and hopeful at the same time. We don't want to limit our ability to approach new connections with an open heart, but we also want to maintain awareness and protect ourselves from those who seek to take advantage of us. Trust your instincts and prioritize your well-being by maintaining open communication, respecting boundaries, and seeking diverse perspectives.

Healthy relationships and groups value transparency, accountability, and mutual respect. By staying informed and proactive, you can learn to recognize manipulation early and make choices that align with your values and interests.

Remember, your safety and autonomy are the most important things, and it's okay to seek support or walk away from situations that feel coercive or harmful.

Stay safe, stay vigilant, and have fun seeking new community, connection, and purpose.