

Toolkit for Identifying & Countering

→ **Psychological
Manipulation &
Coercive Control**



Toolkit for Identifying and Countering 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. This toolkit serves as a comprehensive guide to Identifying & Countering Psychological Manipulation and Coercive Control. It is meant to equip mental health professionals with the knowledge and strategies needed to navigate the intricate dynamics of manipulation and coercion. By exploring the distinct definitions of PM and CC, recognizing signs of manipulation, understanding stages and motivations for involvement, and embracing targeted intervention and prevention steps, this toolkit can act as a guide to help others gain distance from manipulative groups or individuals, reclaim agency, and foster resilience.



Section Guide

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

Define and differentiate psychological manipulation and coercive control.

[Section 2 - Identifying Common Signs](#)

Explore the common signs and behavioural patterns of people under the influence of psychological manipulation and coercive control.

[Section 3 - Stages of Involvement](#)

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

[Section 4 - Understanding Motivations](#)

Gain insights into people's motivations to seek connection and purpose within manipulative environments.

[Section 5 - Steps to Intervention](#)

A comprehensive toolkit of intervention strategies tailored to various stages of manipulation.

[Section 6 - Pillars of Prevention](#)

Take a proactive stance against PM and CC by exploring the pillars of prevention: Community, Connection, Purpose, and Education.

[Section 7 - Recovery](#)

A note on recovery.

[Section 8 - Violent Extremism](#)

Notes on engaging with violent extremism.

[Section 9 - Ideology](#)

Explore ideas on how to guide a PUI away from engagement with complex and convoluted ideologies.

[Section 10 - Resources](#)

Extra notes and ideas to explore.

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, promises of empowerment or new understanding, and 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, 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 generate more effective interventions.

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

SECTION 02

Identifying PM & CC

Depending on the group or circumstance, signs of PM and CC might look different, but some commonalities can serve as warning signs.



Common Signs of PM & CC³

Isolation

People under the influence of PM or CC—referred to as Persons Under Influence (PUI)—often experience a heightened sense of isolation, distancing themselves from friends, family, and their broader social network. This isolation is frequently directed by the manipulator or group, who seeks to sever the PUI's ties with external sources of support and differing viewpoints or external sources of information. A noticeable decline in discussions about friends and family may occur, potentially leading to their omission from conversations. The PUI's attention might become fixated on new connections from the manipulative source, sidelining previous relationships. Isolation is a central strategy in both PM and CC, stemming either directly from manipulation or as a result of the PUI's new (and often extreme) perspectives conflicting with their former social world.

Manipulative tactics often lead PUIs to adopt the belief that their friends and family...

- › ...don't understand them.
- › ...won't accept their new beliefs, new friends or new relationship.
- › ...are trying to manipulate or control them.
- › ...are selfish, jealous or evil.
- › ...are abusive or have abused them in the past (even if that is not true).

Drastic Personality Shifts

A PUI may undergo sudden and profound changes in attitudes, values, and interests. They might tend to reject their past interests or opinions harshly and hold onto new ones that align with the beliefs and preferences of the manipulator or group. The PUI's demeanour might also undergo changes depending on the specific group or type of manipulation involved. For example, in cases of PM, the PUI may become more open, boisterous, self-confident and opinionated as they embrace a new doctrine or set of beliefs that they are encouraged by the group to share. Conversely, in instances of CC, a PUI might become more

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

introverted, reserved, self-deprecating or even confused, as CC often involves belittling and gaslighting, which can sow self-doubt and shame. The PUI's personality shifts may also manifest more physically, including changes in physical appearance, style or diet and exercise habits. In the case of sex trafficking this may also include sudden access to things such as high-value clothes, bags, cars or other luxury items. Language changes might also be noticeable, as the PUI might adopt words, phrases and linguistic styles commonly used by the group or manipulator.

PUI's of PM might believe they...

- › ...have access to special knowledge or truth.
- › ...know better than the majority of people.
- › ...have simple answers to complex problems.
- › ...know how best to live.
- › ...need to share their views with others in order to save the world.
- › ...need to convert others in order to save their souls.
- › ...have to act in extreme or violent ways to support their new beliefs.

PUI's of CC might believe they:

- › ...are always wrong (but their manipulator is always right).
- › ...are defective or deficient in some way.
- › ...are crazy or stupid.
- › ...are weak, lazy or boring.
- › ...are evil or terrible in some way.
- › ...are broken and need to be fixed.
- › ...are worthless.

In some cases, a PUI might hold contradictory sets of beliefs such as feeling they know better than most people, but are still wrong or stupid. This can be the result of complex gaslighting and manipulation prevalent in situations like high-control group⁴ involvement. The PUI might be belittled and told they are wrong or stupid, but that they can be saved or made better by the group or manipulator. This reinforces dependence by ensuring reliance on the 'truth' the group or manipulator espouses. By strongly adhering to these truths or trying to emulate the group or manipulator, the PUI becomes more dependent, as they might feel they are on the only path to more worth, intelligence, truth etc.

4. High-control groups are otherwise known as cults, but since that word is hotly debated and sensationalized, we will use the term high-control groups. This term can also encompass a wider range of groups including MLMs, self-help groups, gurus, high-control psychotherapy groups, highly controlled religious sects etc. Basically, any group that uses tactics of PM or CC to control members for monetary or social gain.

Extreme Defensiveness

A PUI may display heightened defensiveness or hostility when their beliefs, relationships or actions are questioned. Manipulators often instill an “us vs. them” mentality in those they manipulate. This can lead to defensive attitudes as the rest of the world outside the group or relationship is considered dangerous, damaging or coercive. PUI’s who express extreme defensiveness might believe that all external sources of information are wrong, biased, or harmful and that they are the only ones with access to the truth. They will likely be unwilling to question their own thought processes or explore alternative viewpoints, and they may respond with resistance or aggression when confronted.

Emotional Dependence

A PUI might over-rely on their manipulator for validation, approval, or a sense of identity. They may struggle to recognize positive qualities within themselves that haven’t received the manipulator’s approval. They may also experience difficulty expressing their genuine emotions.

Tactics used to modify or obscure a PUI’s emotions may include:

- › Guilt or shame being placed on the PUI for expressing or feeling specific emotions.
- › Social or physical punishment for negative emotions relating to the group or manipulator.
- › Specific direction around what emotions are acceptable.
- › Threats of punishment for expressing or feeling ‘wrong’ emotions.

This kind of emotional manipulation can lead to an inability to recognize or express emotion and can enhance reliance on the group or manipulator for emotional direction.

Typically, especially in the [Deep](#) and [Critical](#) stages, the PUI focuses on the manipulator or group for direction, often disregarding their needs and aspirations. Consequently, the PUI may become subsumed by the goals and wishes of the manipulator and find it difficult to express their individuality, make independent decisions or share their own thoughts. Sometimes this can be recognized by the use of “we” language, where the PUI seems unable or unwilling to refer to themselves in the singular.

Erosion of Boundaries

A PUI will likely experience an erosion of boundaries, sometimes to an extreme extent. They may exhibit an unwillingness to say no to requests made by the manipulator or group. Frequently, manipulators initiate boundary breaches through subtle means initially, progressively intensifying their demands over time.

PUI's may surrender some of the following boundaries:



Personal space

Manipulators might demand more and more time with the PUI and lessen their involvement with other relationships and activities.



Physical Freedom

Manipulators might demand constant accountability and implement a tracking system to monitor the PUI's whereabouts.



Privacy

Manipulators might demand confession or knowledge of the PUI's innermost thoughts or details about their intimate relationships.



Autonomy

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



Financial Freedom

Manipulators might take control of the PUI's finances or monitor them, restricting purchases and the ability for PUI's to save money for the future.



Freedom of Dissent

Fear of retaliation, punishment, or rejection may prevent a PUI from expressing dissenting opinions or questioning the manipulator's directives.

Stages Of Involvement



Identifying the level of involvement with a manipulative group or individual is an essential step in creating effective strategies to counteract manipulation. There are multiple stages of involvement in a manipulative relationship to consider. Every stage presents unique challenges and demands. By distinguishing between these stages, we can customize support, offering help based on the PUI's position within 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 PUI is lavished with compliments and made to feel highly valued. This stage is typically brimming with excitement, where new ideas or people are captivating, and subtle cues of manipulation may only just emerge, making assessment more difficult. During this period, the PUI may still maintain some external connections, but they are encouraged by the manipulator to question their existing relationships or beliefs. Recognizing problems becomes difficult at this stage since the manipulative tactics may not have been fully revealed, and the PUI's values, relationships, or beliefs might not have been tested enough to raise concern. In this phase, the impact on friends and family is often more pronounced than on the PUI, as the excitement of new friendships, lifestyles, romantic bonds, or a set of 'truths' seems novel and thrilling.

Deep Stage

The Deep Stage marks a deeper immersion of the PUI within the group or relationship. This is a time of substantial involvement and change. During this phase, the PUI may show signs of many common PM and CC indicators. At this stage, the PUI can also find themselves increasingly distanced from their old social circles, resulting in a notable impact on their friends and family. The PUI will also likely exhibit a defensive attitude towards the group, relationship, or newly adopted beliefs, making them resistant to alternative viewpoints or introspection. Additionally, the PUI may have made significant commitments to the group or manipulator, potentially involving financial investments or severing ties, which would make them more reliant and vulnerable to manipulation.

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. See more about it in our [red flags list](#).



Critical Stage

The Critical Stage represents a phase during which the PUI becomes extremely vulnerable due to prolonged exposure to harmful manipulation tactics. PUIs in this stage will likely experience 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 manipulative abuse, including belittling, erosion of their identity, gaslighting, coerced confession, and in some instances, physical violence or sexual abuse. Surveillance and monitoring may hinder their ability to engage in private conversations without being accountable to the group or manipulator. During this stage, the PUI may question their involvement in the group or relationship or display extreme defensiveness. At this time, PUIs might also have taken actions on behalf of the manipulator or group that are not aligned with their moral values, potentially leading them to suffer moral injury⁶ or to double down on their belief that the group or manipulator knows best.

6. Moral injury refers to the profound psychological distress and internal conflict that arises from actions or situations that go against one's deeply held moral beliefs, values, or ethical principles. It often occurs when individuals are involved in or witness events that challenge their sense of right and wrong, leading to feelings of guilt, shame, moral ambiguity, and a loss of trust in oneself and others. See more about moral injury in our [Recovery Toolkit](#).

Understanding Motivations



To best support PUIs, it is important to understand their motivations and the reasoning behind their involvement with their group or manipulator. This understanding will allow ease of transition out of the manipulative situation and lay the foundation for the PUI to rediscover fulfilment beyond the group or relationship. Understanding motivations can also facilitate prevention by identifying and addressing the needs that might leave individuals vulnerable.

There are many reasons why an individual might be motivated to and get involved in a manipulative group or relationship.

Here, we highlight three key motivations:

- › Community
- › Connection
- › Purpose

Community

Human beings are inherently social. We are biologically wired for living in small, tight-knit communities. It is only recently in our evolutionary history that we have 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 epidemic.⁷ 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 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.

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, there is some connection on offer—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.

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



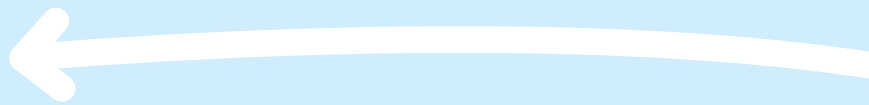
Purpose

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 great deal of knowledge and understanding to make an impact. On an evolutionary level, we have also moved away from a constant need to fulfil our primary biological purposes of reproduction and survival and 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, 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.

The three factors of community, connection and purpose allow us to better understand the motivations for involvement in and susceptibility to manipulative groups and relationships. Using these factors as a guide, we can now focus on intervention and prevention for PM and CC.

SECTION 05

**Countering
PM & CC**



Intervention

Effective intervention in cases of PM and CC requires compassion and strategic planning. Here, we cover ten strategies for intervention.

1 BUILD TRUST

Establish a trusting and non-judgmental environment in which the PUI can feel free to share. Assure them that you are there to support and not criticize them. The PUI will likely have faced some resistance from friends or family about their relationship, group or new beliefs, especially in the [Deep](#) and [Critical](#) stages, so building trust is crucial to help them open up about their experiences.

2 EMPATHETIC & OPEN LISTENING

The goal with any PUI should never be to remove them from the situation directly unless they request help to exit. Defensiveness and a lack of understanding about PM and CC often make it difficult to recognize the influence of a group or individual. Allow the PUI to guide the conversation and listen with genuine interest and empathy. Allow them to express their thoughts and feelings without judgment. Try to understand their perspective and emotions and get to the root of their experience with the manipulator or group.

3 ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

In manipulative situations, questioning is often discouraged. Create a safe environment to explore and allow the PUI to reflect on their situation by asking broad, open-ended questions. This can help them critically evaluate their circumstances and thought patterns without feeling pressured by direct or judgemental questions.

Here are some sample questions to consider:

- › Can you tell me more about your experiences with the group/relationship?
- › How have your beliefs or opinions changed since you got involved with this group/person?

- › What initially attracted you to this group/relationship?
- › What do you find most meaningful about your interactions with this group/person?
- › How do you feel when participating in the activities or discussions within the group/relationship?
- › What would happen if you left the group/relationship?
- › Have you noticed any changes in your relationships with friends or family since becoming involved? How do you feel about those changes?
- › Can you describe a time when you had doubts or concerns about the group/relationship? How did you handle those feelings?
- › What are some of the reasons people might be drawn to this group/individual?
- › How do you envision your future in relation to your involvement with this group/relationship?
- › What are some of the values or beliefs that you've adopted since becoming a part of this group/relationship? How are they different from your old values or beliefs?
- › What role do you feel you play within the group/relationship? How does that make you feel?
- › In what ways has your daily life changed since you got involved with this group/relationship? How do you feel about those changes?
- › What are your thoughts on the information or messages shared by the group/individual? Do you have any questions?
- › How does your involvement in this group/relationship align with your personal goals and aspirations?
- › What would you like to achieve or experience outside this group/relationship?

Depending on their level of involvement, the PUI may not be ready to explore their own thoughts and feelings around the group or manipulator. Exploring personal feelings, especially negative ones, may feel disloyal, scary or disruptive to the sense of self they have developed within the framework of the manipulation. If that is the case, it may be necessary to start with questions that allow for emotional distance from the situation by exploring the perspective of how someone else might view the group, manipulator, or situation.

Here are some sample questions that might allow for both cognitive and emotional distance:

- › What might attract others to the group/individual?
- › What might some people find challenging about being in this group/with this individual?
- › What have other people said about this group/individual?
- › What would you say to a friend who was involved in this group/with this individual?
- › What aspects of the group/relationship might be difficult for outsiders to understand? How would you explain it to them?

4 ACKNOWLEDGE AND VALIDATE THEIR EMOTIONS

In situations involving PM and CC, manipulators often exploit a PUI's feelings, using them as a tool for increased control. This manipulation frequently manifests as invalidation of the PUI's emotions – their feelings are questioned and undermined, and the manipulator attempts to reshape their emotional experiences. This is particularly notable when negative emotions arise concerning the manipulative group or relationship, but it can also apply to positive emotions. A group or manipulator may invalidate a PUI's excitement, interest or passion for ideas, goals or people that don't fit with the group or relationship in order to increase dependency, reduce outside interests, and encourage the PUI to conform. PUI's can also face invalidation from the outside when concerned members of their social circle invalidate their positive feelings or excitement about the group or manipulator. By openly recognizing and validating the PUI's

emotions, you can exemplify healthy relationship dynamics and foster the PUI's self-trust. Ensuring that the PUI can acknowledge and process both positive and negative emotions related to the group or relationship is crucial to building trust and helping them ultimately recognize the harm inflicted upon them. It is important to remember that there are always reasons why the PUI is a part of the group or in the relationship. Letting them know you understand and accept this nuance and complexity can help build a solid foundation of trust.

5 PROVIDE INFORMATION

Often, PUIs will not recognize that they are under the influence of PM or CC, so offering objective information about psychological manipulation and its tactics can be helpful. This might help them recognize common patterns and tactics used by manipulators and allow them to see the similarities in their situation. Information offering should be undertaken carefully, however, especially in the [Initial](#) and [Deep](#) Stages of involvement. If the PUI is not questioning their involvement in the group or relationship, it might be difficult for them to take in information relating to PM and CC as they won't want to see themselves as a "victim" or see their group or partner as manipulative. Information on PM and CC may also trigger defensiveness, fear or mistrust. Therefore, present this information in a non-judgmental manner and only when you are confident that the PUI is receptive and prepared to absorb it.

Here are some signs that a person might be ready to take in information about PM and CC:

Expressed Curiosity or Concern

If the PUI has shown curiosity or concern about their situation or has asked questions related to manipulation, this could indicate an openness to learning more.

Acknowledgment of Negative Feelings

If the PUI has openly discussed feeling uncomfortable, confused, or distressed in their current situation, they might be more receptive to understanding the dynamics at play.

Questioning the Relationship or Group

If the PUI has begun to question aspects of the manipulative

relationship or group, it could signify a growing awareness of potential issues.

Expressed Desire for Change

If the PUI has mentioned a desire for change, personal growth, or improved well-being, they may be open to exploring information to help them achieve these goals.

Increased Critical Thinking

If you notice the PUI engaging in more critical thinking or asking deeper questions about their experiences, they may be ready to delve into the concepts of PM and CC.

Seeking Help or Support

If the PUI has actively sought advice, guidance, or support from others, it may indicate a willingness to learn and consider different perspectives.

Decreased Defensiveness

If the PUI's defensiveness or resistance seems lessened, they might be more open to receiving information.

Building Trust

If you have established a strong rapport and trust with the PUI, they may be more inclined to listen to your insights and recommendations⁸.

Emotional Readiness

Observe the PUI's emotional state. If they seem more stable or open to discussing and trusting their feelings, they may be in a better position to absorb information.

Loss or At Risk

Sometimes PUI's can be more open to questioning their beliefs or involvement in harmful groups or relationships if they are at risk or have lost a significant amount (money, freedom due to incarceration or arrest, relationships etc.). If the PUI has something at risk or has lost something significant, they may be ready to reexamine their involvement with the group or manipulator.

8. You can't rely on a previous relationship to be the basis of trust. The PUI will be a different person than they were before the group or relationship. You will likely need to rebuild trust under the new paradigm for information to be considered.

6 EMPOWER CRITICAL & COMPLEX THINKING

Often, part of the appeal of psychologically manipulative groups or relationships is that they offer simple answers to complex problems and present the world as black-and-white with little ambiguity or complexity. Creating an environment that encourages critical and complex thinking can help the PUI learn to question information, beliefs, and decisions and develop empathetic and nuanced thinking. Similar to [providing information](#), empowering critical and complex thinking might be difficult if the PUI is highly defensive.

If the PUI is ready and receptive, here are some things to consider when empowering critical and complex thinking:

Share Alternative Perspectives

Gently introduce alternative viewpoints or information without imposing them. Offer different angles to consider, promoting a broader understanding of the situation or issue.

Use Socratic Questioning ([Appendix A](#))

Use the Socratic method by asking specific questions that guide the PUI to think deeper about their beliefs and the consequences of their actions.

Explore Motivations

Help the PUI explore their own [motivations](#) and the motivations of the manipulator. Encourage them to question why they are drawn to certain beliefs or actions.

Highlight Inconsistencies

Gently point out any inconsistencies or contradictions in the messages the PUI is receiving. Ask them to reflect on why these inconsistencies might exist and what they mean about the group or manipulator.

Find Counter-Examples

If the PUI is struggling with choices they made or things they might have done differently, help them find examples of times outside of the group or relationship in which they made different choices that they were more aligned with. These examples of successful decision-making can help the PUI create a new narrative about themselves as someone empowered with autonomy and agency.

Provide Resources

Share reputable sources of information about tactics of psychological manipulation and coercive control. This allows the PUI to learn independently and make informed decisions.

Admit Wrong

Seek opportunities to admit you are wrong, explain and apologize if necessary. Manipulative groups and individuals thrive when they create an environment where they are always right. Modelling accountability and being wrong in a graceful manner is important to help the PUI see that mistakes are natural and normal.

7 SHARE STORIES

Listening to narratives and gaining insights from someone who has undergone a similar experience can be a potent source of strength for a PUI. In counselling for high-control group members, it is common to have a former member of the same group participate in the exit and recovery. Many peer-support programs have a history of success and efficacy due to the shared experience and mutual understanding that peer support can foster^{8,9,10}. Real-life examples of exit and recovery from psychologically manipulative groups and relationships can inspire hope and demonstrate that a meaningful life outside the group or relationship is possible.

For hate groups or other closed-off high-control groups with limited access to outside information, sharing stories could take the form of exposure to new ideas or people. Exposure to other people¹¹ and viewpoint in a low-stakes or safe environment could be helpful to acclimatize PUIs to new ways of thinking and plant seeds for contemplation and future integration.

8 SAFE EXIT PLANNING

If the manipulative situation involves potential danger to the PUI or others, help the PUI create a safe exit plan. This is especially important in the [Deep](#) and [Critical](#) Stages of involvement where the PUI might have surrendered much of their autonomy emotionally, physically and/or financially.

9. <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD012880.pub2/full>

10. <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2020/03/alcoholics-anonymous-most-effective-path-to-alcohol-abstinence.html>

11. <https://nursing.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/teams/13/An%20evaluation%20of%20the%20Peer%20Support%20Services%20peer%20model.pdf>

12. <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robos>

Here are some steps to consider when creating a safety plan for the PUI:

Assess the Situation

Help the PUI understand the nature and level of manipulation they are dealing with. Identify potential risks, threats, or obstacles they may face when leaving.

Build a Support Network

Help the PUI develop a plan to reach out to friends, family, or trusted individuals who can provide emotional support and assistance. If social ties have been severed due to the PUI's involvement with the group or relationship, this may involve reconnecting and rebuilding relationships. Connect the PUI with support groups, specialized counsellors, or helplines specializing in manipulation and abuse.

Gather Information

Help the PUI research legal rights and resources available for protection and assistance. Help them document any evidence of manipulation, abuse, or threats.

Secure Financial Independence

Encourage the PUI to assess their financial situation and explore options for financial independence, such as opening a separate bank account or securing a source of income.

Secure Essential Documents

Encourage the PUI to gather important documents like identification, financial records, passports, and legal documents. Keep copies in a safe location.

Create a Safe Exit Plan

Help the PUI choose a safe time and place to leave, preferably when the manipulator or group is not present or aware. Help them plan their escape route and transportation to a safe location where they will be secure for a reasonable amount of time.

Communicate the Plan

Encourage the PUI to inform their trusted support network about their decision to leave and share their safety plan. Help the PUI come up with a code word or signal to alert their network if they are in danger or need immediate assistance.

Secure Online Presence

Encourage the PUI to change passwords to all online accounts, including social media and email, to prevent unauthorized access. Suggest that they use a secure device or private browsing mode when researching or communicating their plans.

Consider Legal Protection

Assist the PUI in obtaining restraining orders or protection orders, if needed, to restrict the manipulator's access to them legally.

Pack Essentials

Help the PUI prepare an essentials list that includes clothing, medication, personal items, and important documents.

Notify Authorities

Encourage the PUI to contact local law enforcement or an applicable hotline if they feel threatened or unsafe. Not all people feel safe or comfortable contacting the police in case of a threat. If that is the case, help the PUI prepare a list of Police alternatives. See [Appendix B](#) for notes on Police alternatives.

Maintain No-Contact

If possible, encourage the PUI to cut off all communication with the manipulator and block their access once they have exited the group or relationship.

Monitor and Adjust

Regularly review and adjust the PUI's safety plan based on changing circumstances.

9 ENCOURAGE & EXPLORE COMMUNITY, CONNECTION AND PURPOSE

Each PUI's reason for involvement in a group or relationship is distinct, and it's crucial to acknowledge and understand their motivations. As you guide a PUI in exiting a manipulative situation, collaborate to identify alternative, healthy outlets for community, connection, and purpose. By addressing their original motivations and helping them cultivate a new sense of fulfillment and connection, you reduce the risk of them falling prey to PM and CC in the future. See the [prevention](#) section for ideas and the [resources](#) section on our website for links to programs that support community, connection and purpose.


10 GIVE PERMISSION

Sometimes, a PUI needs permission to feel free to exit a situation. Sometimes that's all they need. You can provide that. Give permission to question, to resist, to leave. It's essential, however, to exercise caution and situational awareness. Prioritize safety planning, especially in the case of dangerous or potentially violent groups or relationships.

SECTION 06

Prevention

Prevention plays a crucial role in countering psychological manipulation and coercive control. To bolster resilience and minimize vulnerability, we will focus on four essential factors: **community, connection, purpose, and education.**



Community

Community is vital in fostering a sense of belonging, purpose, and overall fulfillment in people's lives. When people lack access to healthy and meaningful communities, they feel isolated and lost, leaving them susceptible to the allure of manipulative groups or relationships.

At an individual level, we must help people find and engage with supportive and enriching communities. By offering people opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals, share experiences, and build genuine relationships, we can create a solid foundation of support that mitigates the risk of falling victim to psychological manipulation or coercive control.

On a broader scale, we must work together to cultivate healthy communities that promote interconnectedness. We can counter PM and CC more effectively by nurturing environments that encourage open dialogue, diverse perspectives, and deep connection.

To foster a sense of community, you can:

- › Help people find social events, clubs, sports or hobby groups that align with their interests.
- › Encourage volunteering for local organizations, community initiatives or local advocacy groups.
- › Share information about local support groups that align with the person's challenges. However, ensure the support groups are vetted, as support groups sometimes be toxic and manipulative.¹²
- › Recommend community centers, libraries, or cultural centers where people can take workshops and classes and get involved with activities that generate healthy community connections.
- › Help people find healthy and safe religious or spiritual organizations that offer a sense of community and shared values.
- › Connect people with mentorship programs that can provide guidance and support.

13. See our [red flags](#) list for more details.

For ideas on actions we can take on a societal level to develop more robust communities, see [Appendix C](#).

- › Suggest people organize neighbourhood gatherings, potlucks, or community events.
- › If the person is in school, help them identify school groups and other supports that will help them connect with students and staff.

Connection

Disconnection is a critical problem in the world, exacerbated by our heavy reliance on online interactions at the expense of nurturing genuine human relationships. The problem extends beyond our virtual lives, though, encompassing a detachment from ourselves, our neighbours, nature, and the complexities of our world. This disconnection leaves people grappling with feelings of isolation and a lack of purpose, making them vulnerable to manipulation.

On an individual level, we must help guide people toward rediscovering crucial connections. This means steering them away from the digital realm, recognizing that online spaces can be breeding grounds for recruitment into manipulative groups. We can shield people from misinformation and vitriol online by encouraging real-world interactions and facilitating real-life connections. We must also help people form connections to build emotional, spiritual, physical, and financial support systems. Robust connections to healthy people, groups and ideas help generate resilience against psychological manipulation and coercive control.

On a larger scale, we must work to address the inequity and injustice that drive people to seek connections in harmful places. By addressing the root causes that lead people to get involved with exploitative schemes like multi-level marketing, abusive self-help figures, or extremist groups, we can change the pathways that lead to vulnerability. Also, promoting concepts of respect, empathy, and authentic support can shift people's perception of healthy relationships and contribute to the prevention of manipulative intimate partner dynamics.

We must cultivate a world where meaningful connections are valued and prioritized – whether with other people, the environment, or the community. By reinforcing these connections, we empower people to be resilient against psychological manipulation and coercive control.

To foster a sense of connection, you can:

- › Help people find ways to overcome financial insecurity through government programs or assistance and planning steps to find stable employment if possible.
- › Help people define, understand and practice healthy interpersonal relationship dynamics.
- › Encourage people to reconnect with nature by exploring nearby parks and natural spaces.
- › Help people 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 people find reliable and unbiased sources of information and news.
- › Encourage people to maintain strong and weak ties as well. Weak ties can be an important source of connection¹³ and meaningful interaction.¹⁴

Purpose

Most people want to make a positive impact on the world and find a clear direction in their lives. Unfortunately, the complexity of modern life and the lack of clear pathways often leave people without a sense of purpose, making them susceptible to the promises of manipulative groups or individuals.

On an individual level, our efforts should focus on helping people rediscover and pursue genuine purpose. This involves guiding them towards pursuits that align with their values and aspirations, empowering them to find fulfillment in their own unique way. Providing resources and support for educational and vocational opportunities can also steer them away from the appeal of manipulators who offer easy answers.

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

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

Addressing societal factors that contribute to a lack of purpose is crucial on a larger scale. By creating safe and inclusive environments that offer diverse opportunities for personal growth, education, and career development, we can diminish the allure of manipulative groups that mislead and exploit.

To foster a sense of purpose, you can:

- › Encourage people to take time to reflect on their passions, values, interests, and strengths. What activities or causes truly resonate with them? What brings them joy and fulfillment?
- › Encourage trying new hobbies, volunteering opportunities, or activities they've never experienced.
- › Help define and set short-term and long-term goals and identify pathways to achieve them.
- › Help find a mentor or guide in a field of interest.
- › Help people identify their core values. Exploring values can serve as a foundation for finding purpose.
- › Encourage people to connect with others with diverse perspectives and purposes to get a sense of the breadth of possibility.
- › Explore the possibility of education to enhance or gain new skills. Help find educational funding through grants or scholarships.
- › Explore means of purpose through avenues beyond employment, including community engagement, connection to nature, or volunteering.
- › Encourage people to explore without the pressure of immediately finding a specific purpose. Purpose often emerges gradually through experimentation; therefore, it shouldn't be forced.

Education

Education is key to countering PM and CC, but its accessibility and quality can impact vulnerability to manipulation. Access to accurate information about the signs of PM and CC and the development of critical thinking skills is essential for making informed decisions and countering manipulation.

Education that helps to counter PM and CC includes:

Understanding PM and CC

Both broad and specialized knowledge about PM and CC, including the signs and strategies for intervention and prevention.

Critical Thinking

How to evaluate information, understand truth, identify logical fallacies, navigate complexity, and question assumptions.

Media Literacy

How to navigate and critically assess media sources, including identifying misinformation, bias, and manipulation techniques.

Psychology & Sociology

Psychological and sociological concepts around manipulation techniques and group dynamics.

Ethics and Morality

Ethical decision-making and moral reasoning.

Communication Skills

Effective communication, active listening, assertiveness, and conflict resolution.

Relationship Education

Healthy relationship dynamics, consent, boundaries, and recognizing signs of manipulation in personal relationships.

Emotional Education

Navigating emotions, understanding self and others, trusting your gut and self-acceptance.

Community Building

Identifying and building robust and healthy communities that allow for safe exploration of purpose, creativity, fulfillment and connection.

SECTION 07

RECOVERY



Once a person has exited a situation involving PM and CC, there is much to be considered around recovery. The first considerations must be practical. The EI (Exited Individual) must have basic needs met, such as food, shelter, and supportive connections. They might need help gaining financial independence, finding employment and creating robust support networks. It is not truly possible for someone to work on overcoming the trauma and anxiety caused by PM and CC until they are safe and secure. Once the EI has settled, is socially supported and has begun the practical work of rebuilding their lives, it will then be possible to tackle the mental and emotional work necessary for recovery. The EI will likely be suffering from the traumatic experience with the group or manipulator. They may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, or PTSD¹⁶. They may also be affected by moral injury and have lingering feelings of guilt or shame. Recovery from PM and CC is complex and will not be addressed fully in this toolkit. Please find resources for recovery in the [resources](#) section on our website, and see our toolkit for recovery for more information.

¹⁶. Keep in mind that trauma may manifest in many ways, including as common symptoms of other mental health disorders (OCD, ADHD, Bipolar, Depression, etc.). Diagnosis of other mental health disorders is not recommended until an EI has a chance to heal and regain a sense of self, as other diagnoses may mask the underlying trauma cause and prevent healing. See our [recovery toolkit](#) for more information. https://cewh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2013_TIP-Guide.pdf - pg. 15 - section 2.5

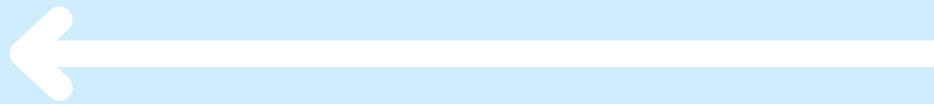


Violent Extremism

In some cases PUI's are the perpetrators of violence. These are cases of violent extremism. If someone you are working with has intentions of perpetrating violence under the influence of a group or manipulator, it is important you reach out to those who have experience with countering violent extremism. Public health and safety come first, so please follow the rules laid out by your profession, city, province or country for reporting violence or threats. However, please consider that PM and CC in regard to violent extremism are often misunderstood, and perpetrators of violence under the influence are often victims in their own way. Compassion, empathy and understanding are needed to help counter this threat. Please see ETA and FOCUS Toronto in the [resources](#) section on our website for further support.

SECTION 09

Ideology



In cases involving high-control groups, whether religious, hate-based, conspiratorial, or self-help-oriented, PUIs often adopt intricate and convoluted ideologies that encompass a mix of concepts, myths, prophecies, common truths, and clichés. These ideologies can distort a PUI's perception of reality, making it challenging for them to access external information or engage in independent thought.

When supporting a PUI, it is essential to steer clear of delving into the group's or manipulator's ideology. Instead, focus on discussions about the PUI's personal feelings, experiences, and thoughts. This can be particularly difficult, as the deeply ingrained ideology may make PUIs fear potential repercussions for straying from the prescribed language and concepts they've absorbed from the group or manipulator.

Here are some ways to avoid entangling with ideology while assisting PUIs:

- › **Keep it Simple**
Use straightforward language that avoids triggering pre-programmed counter-ideology responses, such as clichés, idioms, or stereotypes.
- › **Rephrase Complex Ideas**
Encourage PUIs to rephrase complex notions in plain language. This not only helps them better understand their thoughts but also enables you to engage in more meaningful discussions.
- › **Stay Grounded**
Gently guide the conversation back to present realities, practical matters, their emotions, or aspects they can control whenever the PUI starts using excessive ideological jargon.

By carefully steering the PUI away from ideological engagement, you can help create a safe space for meaningful communication and reflection. This can help PUIs to gradually break free from the grip of complex ideologies and regain their clarity of thought.

SECTION 10



Appendices

Appendix A

Socratic Questioning

Socratic questioning is a structured approach involving a series of questions designed to encourage deeper exploration of ideas. The process typically progresses through several stages, guiding the person toward a deeper understanding of a concept or issue. Here is a general outline of the structure of Socratic questioning:

1. **Clarification and Elicitation:** Begin with questions that help clarify the PUI's initial statements or beliefs. Ask them to explain their ideas in more detail and provide specific examples. This stage sets the foundation for further exploration.
2. **Probing Assumptions:** Encourage the PUI to identify and examine the assumptions underlying their beliefs or statements. Ask questions that challenge these assumptions and prompt them to consider why they hold certain beliefs.
3. **Exploring Reasons and Evidence:** Ask questions that prompt the PUI to provide reasons and evidence to support their beliefs. Encourage them to think critically about the sources of their information and the strength of their evidence.
4. **Considering Alternative Viewpoints:** Introduce alternative perspectives or viewpoints related to the topic. Encourage the PUI to consider other ways of thinking and explore the implications of these alternatives.
5. **Examining Implications and Consequences:** Ask questions that help the PUI explore their beliefs' potential implications and consequences. Encourage them to think about the broader effects of their ideas and how they might play out in different scenarios.
6. **Questioning the Original Belief:** Guide the PUI to reflect on their initial belief or statement in light of the previous stages of questioning. Encourage them to reevaluate their position and consider whether their original belief still holds true or requires modification.
7. **Synthesis and Reflection:** Conclude the Socratic questioning process by asking the PUI to synthesize their insights and reflect on what they have learned through the inquiry. Encourage them to draw conclusions based on their critical examination of the topic.

Throughout the process, the Socratic questioner aims to create a collaborative and nonjudgmental atmosphere that fosters open

Appendix B

dialogue and exploration. The questions should be carefully tailored to guide the PUI's thinking without leading them to a specific answer. Socratic questioning encourages self-discovery and empowers people to develop critical thinking skills and arrive at well-considered conclusions.

We recognize that for many people, especially people of colour and queer folks, calling the police is not a safe option. Please find some resources below that offer alternatives to police services.

Alternatives

- › **Alternatives to Calling the Police by City**
<https://dontcallthepolice.com/>
- › **Don't Call the Police - Toronto**
<https://dontcallthepolice.com/toronto-on-canada/>
- › **ETA Toronto**
<https://etatoronto.ca/>
- › **Toronto Community Crisis Service - 211**
<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/public-safety-alerts/community-safety-programs/toronto-community-crisis-service/>
- › **DC Alternatives to Calling the Police (US-based)**
bit.ly/safetybeyondpolice
- › **CAHOOTS (Oregon - Springfield/Eugene)**
<https://whitebirdclinic.org/cahoots/>

Education

- › **Create a 'Pod' of Helpers**
<https://batjc.wordpress.com/resources/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/>
- › **Creative Interventions Toolkit - A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Harm**
<https://www.creative-interventions.org/toolkit/>

- › **Things to Consider Before Calling the Police on Someone**
<https://www.verywellmind.com/things-to-consider-before-you-call-the-police-on-someone-5076019>
- › **Transform Harm – A Resource Hub for Ending Violence**
<https://transformharm.org/>
- › **Toronto Non-Police Crisis Intervention**
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-policing-alternative-pilot-1.6083164>

Appendix C

Here are some ideas to help promote community on a societal level:

- › Establish and support community centers that provide safe spaces for people to gather, socialize, and engage in activities that promote community and connection.
- › Establish culturally sensitive and specific services and resources that move beyond the medicalized Eurocentric models of intervention and care.
- › Implement inclusive government, social and corporate policies that encourage diversity and create environments where everyone feels welcomed, respected, and valued
- › Create and support after-school programs, mentorship initiatives, and extracurricular activities for youth to build positive relationships, develop skills, and explore interests
- › Encourage civic participation through town hall meetings, community forums, and workshops, facilitating open dialogue and collaboration.
- › Establish local support networks for individuals facing loneliness, isolation, or life transitions, providing a sense of belonging and connection.
- › Design and maintain public spaces that promote interaction, such as parks, community gardens, and outdoor gathering areas.
- › Fund and organize cultural events, art exhibitions, music festivals, and theatre performances that bring diverse communities together.
- › Offer training and workshops in conflict resolution, communication skills, and empathy to enhance relationship-building and reduce community tensions.
- › Increase access to mental health services and resources, ensuring people receive the support they need to maintain emotional well-being.

- › Develop programs that connect younger generations with seniors to foster intergenerational relationships and knowledge sharing.
- › Develop robust education systems to inform people about the risks of PM and CC and how to prevent involvement with manipulators and manipulative groups.



Appendix D

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."