

Toolkit for Helping Youth

→ **Under the Influence
of Psychological
Manipulation and
Coercive Control**



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Coercive Control**

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Introduction

You are here because you are caring for a young person who is under the influence of psychological manipulation (PM) and coercive control (CC), or you are worried about a youth coming under the influence. These are complicated issues, and it is difficult to identify and grapple with their effects. Seeing a young person slip away is heartbreaking, and it is often hard to know what to do. This toolkit is designed to help you understand and navigate PM and CC and give you ways to reconnect with and support youth. This toolkit covers identifying, countering and prevention.

It is important to know that there is no quick fix or straight path to countering and prevention. Helping someone in the grips of PM and CC takes time, empathy and patience. You must be ready to take small, slow steps toward building trust and connection.

This toolkit can help you get to a place of deeper understanding with a young person and make a plan to connect with them. If you feel overwhelmed by the information in this toolkit, please find a PM and CC-informed therapist to help guide you through this process. PM and CC-trained therapists and other resources are listed in the resources section on Counter's [website](#).

A note about emergencies: Sometimes, youth under the influence of PM and CC can have acute issues that must be handled immediately. This might be something like problematic addiction, psychosis related to [certain spiritual practices](#), or suicidal ideation or attempts. If this is the case with a youth you are caring for, please seek professional help immediately. Look for a local hospital with applicable mental health services and take the young person in. If you know the youth is under the influence of PM and CC, share the information on the [Counter website](#) with hospital staff to give them a better understanding of the situation. If the young person is suffering from meditation-related psychosis, please contact [Cheetah House](#) for more information and support. If the youth is involved with violent extremism, please see [Section 13](#) for more information.



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Definitions: What is PM & CC?



In order to understand the youth's situation, it is important to get a better sense of psychological manipulation and coercive control overall. In the next two sections, we will look at definitions of PM and CC and some common signs to look for.

Psychological Manipulation (PM)

Psychological manipulation is the intentional use of manipulative tactics to take advantage of people on a psychological level. These tactics are used to control people's decision-making processes to gain money and/or social or political power.

These tactics include:

- › Controlling or manipulating information (mis/disinformation)
- › Instilling us vs. them thinking
- › False promises of empowerment or new understanding
- › 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 keep in mind if a youth in your care has legal problems due to their involvement with a manipulative group or relationship.

SECTION 02

**Identifying
PM & CC**



Youth and young adulthood is a time of great change and upheaval. Youth constantly struggle to learn, grow and find their place in the world. This can lead to an openness that others can take advantage of. Because youth are in a constant state of change, it is important to differentiate between normal growth and discovery and the influence of PM and CC. Here, we will explore some common signs of PM and CC and differentiate them from typical growth processes.

For more information about cognitive and emotional development in teens, please see [Section 6](#) on understanding motivations. Understanding developmental stages, as well as the risk factors associated with youth will help you to better determine which behaviours are a normal part of development, and which might be signs of PM and CC.

Isolation

Youth under the influence of PM or CC will likely experience a heightened sense of isolation and distance themselves from friends, family, and their broader social network. This isolation is usually directed by the manipulative person or group, who is looking to cut them off from external sources of support, differing viewpoints or other sources of information. You might notice that they have less and less time to spend with you, or maybe they have no time for you at all anymore. Their attention might become fixated on their new group or relationship at the expense of all else.

If a youth is being manipulated into isolation, they might express feelings that you:

- › ...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).

It is important to remember that there might be many other reasons for youth to isolate themselves. Before assuming PM or CC is the cause, it is important to establish whether their isolation is being directed by others or coming from some other source. If you are experiencing difficulties connecting with a young person in order to determine the reason for their isolation, please see the sections on [creating a connection](#) and [building connection](#).

Some other reasons for isolation and feeling misunderstood might include:

- › Bullying or mistreatment at school
- › Questioning their gender or sexuality
- › Experiencing difficulties connecting with peers
- › Addiction issues (including substances, video games, social media, etc.)
- › Depression, anxiety, cognitive functioning issues or other mental health concerns stemming from non-PM and CC-related issues..don't understand them.



Secrecy

Youth under the influence of PM and CC can exhibit excessive secrecy. This might be because they have been convinced that others don't, can't or won't understand them or because they fear repercussions for actions dictated by the manipulator. Either way, it may seem like a young person is hiding something from you or not being honest about their actions or beliefs.

It is vital to differentiate between privacy and secrecy. Privacy is a fundamental and healthy aspect of developing personal boundaries. It involves the freedom to keep certain aspects of one's life private, a space where youth can develop a sense of self without interference. Encouraging privacy is crucial in fostering trust and independence. Excessive secrecy, however, can be problematic as it might signal a lack of trust and the possibility of external direction by manipulators. Often, in the case of PM and CC, secrecy will be paired with things like isolation and increased defensiveness, which indicate something beyond a normal desire for privacy and independence.

The psychological toll of keeping secrets can be high and lead to further isolation, lack of connection or more reliance on the manipulator. If you are having trouble connecting to a young person, please see the sections on [creating a connection](#) and [building connection](#).

Defensiveness

Under the influence of PM and CC, a young person might become extremely defensive or hostile 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 manipulative.

A youth might come to believe that all external sources of information are wrong or harmful and that they are the only ones with access to the truth. They might believe that their manipulator or group are the only people who understands them and that they can only find love, affection or belonging within the group or relationship. A young person will likely be unwilling to question their own thought processes relating to the group, manipulator or new belief system. They will also likely be unwilling to explore alternative viewpoints and may respond with resistance or aggression if confronted.

Extreme Dependence

A youth might show signs of extreme dependence on a group or relationship for validation, guidance or self-expression. This could include the inability to make decisions without the guidance of the group or manipulator, constant online communications to seek validation or direction, or a lack of ability to talk about themselves in the singular, always referring to themselves as “we.”

It's important to note that it is not uncommon for a young person to engage in group consensus or show a strong desire to conform and fit in with friends or trends. Conformity to a group and interest in following trends is not, independently, a sign of PM and CC. See [Section 6](#) for more details.

When it comes to PM and CC-related dependence, it is important to look for other signs as well, such as:

- › Charismatic leadership
- › Influence of individuals outside of the young person's age range
- › Excessive rules or punishment for refusal to conform
- › Signs of physical and/or sexual abuse¹
- › Heightened anxiety
- › Disturbing beliefs

1. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/child-abuse/symptoms-causes/syc-20370864>

- › Actions or beliefs that don't align with a young person's age or moral standards
- › Drug use/abuse

For more information on signs that can help differentiate between normal and extreme dependence see Counter's [Red Flags List](#).

Drastic Personality Shifts

Under the influence of PM and CC, a youth might show signs of sudden and profound changes in attitudes, values, and interests. You may notice that they are rejecting their past interests or opinions harshly and holding onto new ones that align with the beliefs and preferences of the manipulator or group. Their attitudes might also change drastically depending on the specific group or type of manipulation involved.

For example, in cases of PM, you may notice a young person being more open, boisterous, self-confident and opinionated. This can happen as they embrace a new set of beliefs that they are encouraged by the group or manipulator to share in order to recruit others or prove themselves worthy of the group or relationship. On the other hand, in instances of CC, they might become more introverted, reserved, self-deprecating or even confused, as CC often involves belittling and gaslighting, which can lead to self-doubt and shame.

If a youth is under the influence of PM, they 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.

If a youth is under the influence of CC, they might believe they are:

- › ...always wrong (but their manipulator is always right).
- › ...defective or deficient in some way.

- › ...crazy or stupid.
- › ...weak, lazy or boring.
- › ...evil or terrible in some way.
- › ...broken and need to be fixed.
- › ...worthless.
- › ...unlovable (to anyone but the manipulator).

Sometimes, youth can have contradictory beliefs, such as feeling they know better than most people but are still wrong or stupid. This can be due to complex gaslighting and manipulation common in high-control group (or cult) involvement. They might be belittled and told they are wrong or stupid, but they can be saved or made better by the group or manipulator. By strongly sticking to these truths or trying to emulate the group or manipulator, a young person might become more dependent, as they might feel they are on the only path to more worth, intelligence, truth, goodness, etc.

A youth's personality shifts may also show in a more physical way, including changes in physical appearance, style, diet, sleep 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. A young person might also change how much time they spend online, paired with increased isolation and secrecy.

You might also notice changes in language as a young person may adopt words, phrases or language styles used by the group or manipulator. This change in language could be used to create a sense of belonging and exclusivity among the group members. Using specialized language (including symbols and memes) can also create an "us vs. them" mentality, isolating a young person from the outside world and reinforcing their dependency on the group or manipulator.

A youth's language changes relating to PM and CC might involve:

- › ...sharing strange ideas about the world that are convoluted or conspiracy-based.
- › ...using coded language that you can't understand.
- › ...using political language that doesn't seem right for their age.
- › ...hateful ideas towards others, especially other racialized groups or genders.

- › ...drawing or sharing unfamiliar symbols, signs or memes².

It is important to note that personality shifts and identity changes are common for young people as they look for their place in the world and try new things. It is vital to encourage the exploration of identity and not to stifle creativity, expression and involvement with causes, groups or relationships. A change in identity, beliefs, or personality does not automatically signify PM and CC. Be mindful of all the signs and [red flags](#) before making a judgement about whether or not they are under the influence of manipulation. See [Section 6](#) for more details about cognitive and social development to help in differentiating between positive exploration and signs of PM and CC.

Change of Mood

All of the common signs of PM and CC have the possibility of being paired with a change in mood in youth.

This could involve an increase in:

- › Depression
- › Anxiety
- › Anger or rage
- › Lack of focus
- › Hyperactivity
- › Heightened distress/fear
- › Low self-esteem
- › Excessive confidence

These mood changes can be similar to typical signs of abuse³, as PM and CC in youth can often involve various types of abuse including physical, sexual and emotional. Sometimes PM and CC can act as the root cause for various mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, ADHD, bipolar and BPD. If PM and CC-based mood changes arise, it is vital to address the root cause and help support the youth in exit, as treating the symptoms of mood change will not be effective if they are still under the influence.

It is important to note that youth is a time of transition, and there may be many other possible causes for a change in mood. Ensure that PM and CC are the cause by looking for other common signs and [red flags](#) and eliminating other possible sources of mood change.

2. <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/extreme-measures-toolkit.pdf> - pages 11-13

3. <https://childabuse.stanford.edu/screening/signs.html>

Other reasons for change in mood could be:

- › Bullying or mistreatment at school
- › Questioning of gender or sexuality
- › Experiencing difficulties connecting with peers
- › Diet or sleep issues
- › Abuse in the home or outside the home
- › Addiction or substance abuse
- › Developmental or hormonal changes that occur during adolescence
- › Mental health concerns stemming from non-PM and CC-related issues

Stages Of Involvement



If a youth is under the influence of PM and CC, it is important to identify their involvement stage. This can help when developing a plan, trying to find communication strategies or helping them find pathways to exit or recovery. There are multiple stages of involvement in a manipulative situation to consider. Every stage has unique challenges and demands.

Here, we will cover three stages:

- › Initial Stage
- › Deep Stage
- › Critical Stage



Initial Stage

The Initial Stage is the introduction or early involvement with the group or relationship. Often characterized by love-bombing*, a young person might be showered with compliments and made to feel highly valued. This stage is typically brimming with excitement**, where new ideas or people are captivating, and hints of manipulation may only just start to show, making them more difficult to spot.

During this period, a young person may still maintain some external connections, but they are usually encouraged by the manipulator to question their existing relationships or beliefs. In this phase, the impact on friends and family is often more intense, as the excitement of new friendships, lifestyles, romantic bonds, or a set of 'truths' will seem novel and thrilling.

***Note:** Love-bombing is a common tactic used by high-control groups and manipulative individuals. See more about it in Counter's [red flags list](#).

****Note:** The "honeymoon stage" in any new relationship is real, whether platonic or romantic. It is often a time of excitement filled with the desire to always be around the new object of affection, sometimes at the expense of other relationships or commitments. It is vital not to mistake a healthy honeymoon period in a group or relationship for manipulation. Keep a close eye on the situation and look for [red flags](#) beyond the initial excitement that might occupy a young person for a time.

Deep Stage

At the Deep Stage, a young person will become more deeply involved with the group or relationship. This is a time of intense change. During this phase, you may start to see more common signs of PM and CC.

At this stage, a youth might become increasingly isolated, distancing from their old social circles, friends and even family. They will also likely show a defensive attitude towards the group, relationship, or newly adopted beliefs, making them resistant to other viewpoints or introspection. Additionally, a young person may have made significant commitments to the group or manipulator, potentially involving taking actions that go against their morals or committing to the group or relationship in some way, making them more reliant and vulnerable to manipulation.

Critical Stage

The Critical Stage is when a young person will be extremely vulnerable due to prolonged exposure to harmful manipulation tactics. At this stage, they 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 restrict their ability to have private conversations without being accountable to the group or manipulator.

During this stage, a youth may question their involvement in the group or relationship or display extreme defensiveness. At this time, they will likely have taken actions on behalf of the manipulator or group that are not aligned with their moral values or identity. This could lead them to suffer moral injury* or it might serve to reinforce the belief that the group or manipulator knows best.

***Note:** Moral injury refers to the 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 people 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 Counter's [Recovery Toolkit](#).

Reason for Exit



If a young person you know is under the influence of PM and CC, it is important to get a sense of the reasons why they might exit their group or relationship. This knowledge can give you a better understanding of your expectations when trying to form or maintain a connection with a youth who is being manipulated. Knowing about the reasons for exit can also help you if you want to aid the youth in recovery.

We will explore four different reasons for exit:

- › Forced Exit
- › Escape
- › Snapping Out
- › Arrest or Imprisonment



Forced Exit

Forced exit occurs when someone is expelled from a group or relationship through rejection, shunning or cancellation. This exit is not chosen and may result from a person being seen as unworthy in some way, perhaps from questioning the group, being rebellious, making a mistake deemed unforgivable or saying no too often. In many high-control groups, forced exit can also occur when a person is seen as a burden for some reason, such as becoming sick or mentally unwell, as the majority of high-control groups prefer functioning members who can work and participate fully.

Forced exit can lead to deep feelings of worthlessness, rejection and loneliness. Separating from the group or relationship can result in a complete loss of social support and may greatly diminish a young person's sense of value and purpose. If forced to exit, the youth will possibly maintain some of the beliefs, values and ideologies of the group or manipulator and will likely require guidance to help them think independently and find identity and meaning beyond the group.



Escape

Escape occurs when a young person is able to break free of the manipulative group or relationship despite a threat to their wellbeing. Escape is common in sex trafficking, abusive partnerships, and specific high-control environments including some hate groups.

Escape tends to carry considerable risk in the form of physical or legal harm or the potential to be captured and reintegrated into the group or relationship. In the case of escape, the first concern should always be safety and security. This might involve finding legal assistance, collaborating with relevant authorities, securing shelter, and ensuring financial support.

For safety planning before escape, please see Counter's Toolkit for [Identifying and Countering](#) PM and CC. For safety planning after exit, please see Counter's [Toolkit for Recovery](#).



Snapping Out

Snapping out occurs when a youth realizes that the group or relationship they are involved with is manipulative and damaging. Snapping out can come at any time for any number of reasons. Perhaps someone is exposed to damaging information about the group or manipulator that is usually hidden. Maybe a loved one can break through and convince the young person that their situation is manipulative or dangerous.

Upon snapping out, it might take a youth time to make their exit. They might seek to learn more about the group or manipulator or gain more perspectives from others. There might be planning involved if their exit poses a risk or represents a significant loss.

Sometimes, youth who snap out become whistle-blowers and advocates, choosing to fight against the manipulative force that took advantage of them. Although snapping out can still carry potential risks, there are typically fewer lingering ideological bonds or belief systems from the group or manipulator, which helps to rebuild critical thinking skills and assess truth. Also, young people who snap out are more open to reestablishing connections with relationships that may have been lost or damaged because of the manipulation.



Arrest or Imprisonment

Arrest or imprisonment is common in cases of violent extremism, sex trafficking and certain high-control groups that involve criminal activity such as fraud, human trafficking, child abuse or other physical abuse. Often, an arrest can act as a motivation to help a young person snap out, as it represents a significant loss and serves as a social signal that something is wrong.

Arrest or imprisonment can also lead to escape, as it often provides the necessary distance from the group or manipulator. An arrest can allow a youth to question their situation and actions and provide an opportunity for them to plan an exit with the help of authorities.

Despite the possible benefits of arrest, this does not make it ideal. The criminal justice system is often cruel and unjust, with little knowledge or understanding of the mechanisms of psychological manipulation and coercive control. Those influenced by PM and CC are frequently misunderstood and mistreated by the system, so the aim should always be to steer clear of legal involvement and find other ways to help young people in manipulative situations.

**Pathways to
Recruitment**



There are many pathways to recruitment into manipulative groups and relationships. Getting a better understanding of these pathways can help you keep informed and potentially help redirect a young person's attention to healthier connections. Here, we will cover the recruitment methods and tactics of high-control groups (including religious and spiritual, political, professional development and self-help), multi-level marketing companies (MLMs), corporate and philanthropic high-control organizations, hate and conspiracy groups, sex traffickers and intimate partner controlling relationships.



High-Control Groups

High-control groups encompass a wide range of manipulative environments, groups and relationships, including religious and spiritual, political, professional development and self-help. As they are all different, we will break them down and explore their individual tactics for recruitment.

RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL HIGH-CONTROL GROUPS

Religious and Spiritual High-Control Groups encompass religious organizations, spiritual communities, or leaders who exercise significant influence and control over their followers in the name of faith or spirituality. Leadership within religious and spiritual high-control groups often revolves around charismatic religious figures, gurus, or spiritual leaders who claim unique insights into divine matters or, in some cases, claim to be God (or a god). These leaders recruit and wield authority by emphasizing their spiritual knowledge and the promise of salvation or enlightenment. A primary recruitment tactic for religious high-control groups is to invite youth to a group meeting or event and engage in love-bombing. Love-bombing is a tactic designed to make the youth feel special, unique or highly valued within the group. A young person may leave a group meeting or event feeling a connection they have never felt before. They might also be made to feel like they are special, can make a difference in the world or can find salvation or belonging in a way they couldn't anywhere else.

Religious high-control groups can arise within many contexts, including prayer groups, religious institutional settings, religious camps and school groups. These groups can recruit online directly to youth or through parents or caregivers looking for

positive spaces for the children in their care. Although not all religious settings will be high-control, it is important to watch for the [red flags](#) of PM and CC.

Spiritual high-control groups are more likely to be online-based, with recruitment through video channels like TikTok and YouTube or social media channels and discussion boards. They also engage in love-bombing by making a young person feel connected and deeply understood while also appealing to their sense of spirituality by potentially offering something like a universal sense of connectedness or fulfillment.

POLITICAL HIGH-CONTROL GROUPS

Political High-Control Groups are groups or movements that strictly adhere to a particular political ideology or leader. Although they can stand alone, they are often associated with other groups like hate groups or religious high-control groups. Leadership within political high-control groups is often hierarchical, with charismatic figures (single individuals or multiple) at the top who encourage a rigid political ideology. These leaders use persuasive techniques, propaganda, and fervent rhetoric to attract and maintain followers. Political groups often operate online but may also hold physical rallies or events to attract new members or excite their main base of followers. Recruitment for these groups can take place online through discussion forums like Reddit or 4Chan, through video platforms like YouTube or TikTok, social media discussions on sites like Omegle⁴, X or Instagram, or through news sites. Youth might also be recruited into these groups through face-to-face interactions on high-school and college campuses where recruiters go to spread politically extreme messages and offer printed materials⁵. It's important to note that extreme and manipulative groups exist on both sides of the political spectrum—left and right.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT HIGH-CONTROL GROUPS

Although more common for adult recruitment, professional high-control groups can be appealing to high-achieving youth, especially in high school and college or university. Professional Development High-Control Groups are organizations or communities that exert significant control over individuals

4. <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/what-young-people-parents-and-families-should-know-about-omegle>

5. <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/extreme-measures-toolkit.pdf>

seeking personal or career growth. They might offer courses, classes or workshops designed to develop various skills, including communication, time management and creative skills such as acting, writing, directing or art. Leadership within professional development high-control groups is usually hierarchical, with charismatic figures at the top who promise personal and career transformation or opportunities. These leaders use persuasive techniques, extreme motivational tactics, and elaborate success stories to attract young people. Professional development high-control groups can also apply to sports and coaching in which manipulative and abusive tactics are used to maintain control over youth. These groups recruit online through targeted advertisements, videos and social media, in person at schools or campuses or through parents or caregivers looking for development opportunities for the children in their care.

SELF-HELP HIGH CONTROL GROUPS

Self-Help and Psychotherapy High-Control Groups are companies, groups or communities that exert significant influence and control over youth seeking mental health support, therapy or personal growth. While presenting themselves as providers of therapeutic services or experts on mental health, wellness, etc., these groups use manipulative tactics that can harm young people. Leadership within self-help or high-control psychotherapy groups often involves charismatic therapists, counsellors, healers, or self-proclaimed “experts” who promise transformative healing experiences. Self-help gurus often recruit online through targeted advertisements based on keyword searches that direct youth to videos, online content, or communities.

A particularly prevalent type of self-help high-control environment for youth is troubled teen camps or programs⁶. The troubled teen industry is based around programs that remove so-called “troubled teens” from their homes and isolate them at distant locations or facilities where they are forced to engage in programming that can include intense physical or psychological activity, forced labour or other types of mistreatment and abuse. These programs usually recruit parents who are scared for the future of their children and are made to feel they have no other option but to send their children away.

6. <https://www.youthrights.org/issues/medical-autonomy/the-troubled-teen-industry/>



Multi-Level Marketing Companies (MLMs)

Multi-Level Marketing Companies (MLMs) are complex business models that often attract people seeking financial independence, entrepreneurial opportunities or ideals of prosperity. MLMs typically involve a hierarchical leadership structure, often with charismatic figures at the top who use persuasive techniques to recruit and retain participants. Many MLMs recruit youth to participate in their programming, including teens interested in being “influencers” or wanting to gain perceived or real benefits such as discounts, points, or other rewards. MLMs recruit online through social media, targeted ads and video platforms. They might also recruit in person on campuses or at events. The key to MLM participation is recruiting friends and family to purchase or become sellers (word of mouth). Because of this, teens may be encouraged to reach out to their social network to push their goods or services, often creating isolation as social interactions get reduced to transactions. Love-bombing may also be used as a tactic to make teens feel special, talented or unique in order to lure them into buying into the organization.



Corporate and Philanthropic High-Control Organizations

Corporate and philanthropic organizations may use similar structural patterns to MLMs in order to recruit and retain youth in low-paying, high-workload positions. Summer job programs and internships are popular pathways into these groups. Youth drawn into these organizations can find themselves deeply entrenched in a culture that glorifies the business and isolates them from critical outside perspectives. While some of these organizations mainly operate online or in smaller diffused groups, they may also organize physical meetings, conferences, or recruitment events to bolster their ranks. These gatherings can be persuasive platforms for recruiting youth as they are often highly energetic and may use celebrities or perks and rewards to encourage attendance and generate excitement. These organizations often use specialized language involving motivational slogans and success stories to create a unique identity within the community and draw youth in. Philanthropic organizations often foster a distinct sense of responsibility or the desire to “save the world” in order to appeal to young people’s drive to make a difference and find purpose.

Hate Groups

Hate groups are organizations that promote ideologies built on prejudice, discrimination, and hatred directed toward particular racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups. These groups often spread extremist beliefs, promoting hatred and hostility toward targeted communities. Hate groups thrive on recruiting and radicalizing people by manipulating their fears, grievances, loneliness or desire for purpose to align with the group's extremist agenda. Hate groups often operate online but may also hold physical rallies or events to attract new members or connect followers. Recruitment for these groups can take place online through discussion forums like Reddit or 4chan, video platforms like YouTube or TikTok, social media discussion on sites like Omegle⁷ or Discord, video game platforms like Steam or games like Fortnite, Roblox, Minecraft or Call of Duty⁸⁹, or alternative news sites. Youth might also be recruited into these groups through face-to-face interactions on high-school and college campuses where recruiters go to spread extreme messages and offer printed materials. Youth are also likely to be recruited into hate groups by friends or may be born into hate groups, depending on their familial ties.

Conspiracy Groups

Conspiracy groups are diverse, ranging from loosely connected online communities to tightly knit organizations with hierarchical structures. These groups spread intricate yet unsubstantiated theories about hidden agendas, government cover-ups, or world-altering events. They use fear, distrust of authorities, and the allure of possessing exclusive "hidden knowledge" to recruit followers. Conspiracy groups sometimes have crossover with various other groups, including hate groups and religious high-control groups. Recruitment for these groups can occur online through discussion forums like Reddit, 4chan, 8chan¹⁰ or Discord, video platforms like YouTube or TikTok, social media discussion, or alternative news sites. Typically, recruitment into conspiracy groups is limited to online, but young people may also become involved in conspiracy groups through friends or word-of-mouth.

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7. <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/what-young-people-parents-and-families-should-know-about-omegle>
 8. <https://theconversation.com/extremists-use-video-games-to-recruit-vulnerable-youth-heres-what-parents-and-gamers-need-to-know-193110>
 9. <https://bhr.stern.nyu.edu/tech-gaming-report>
 10. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531>

Sex Trafficking

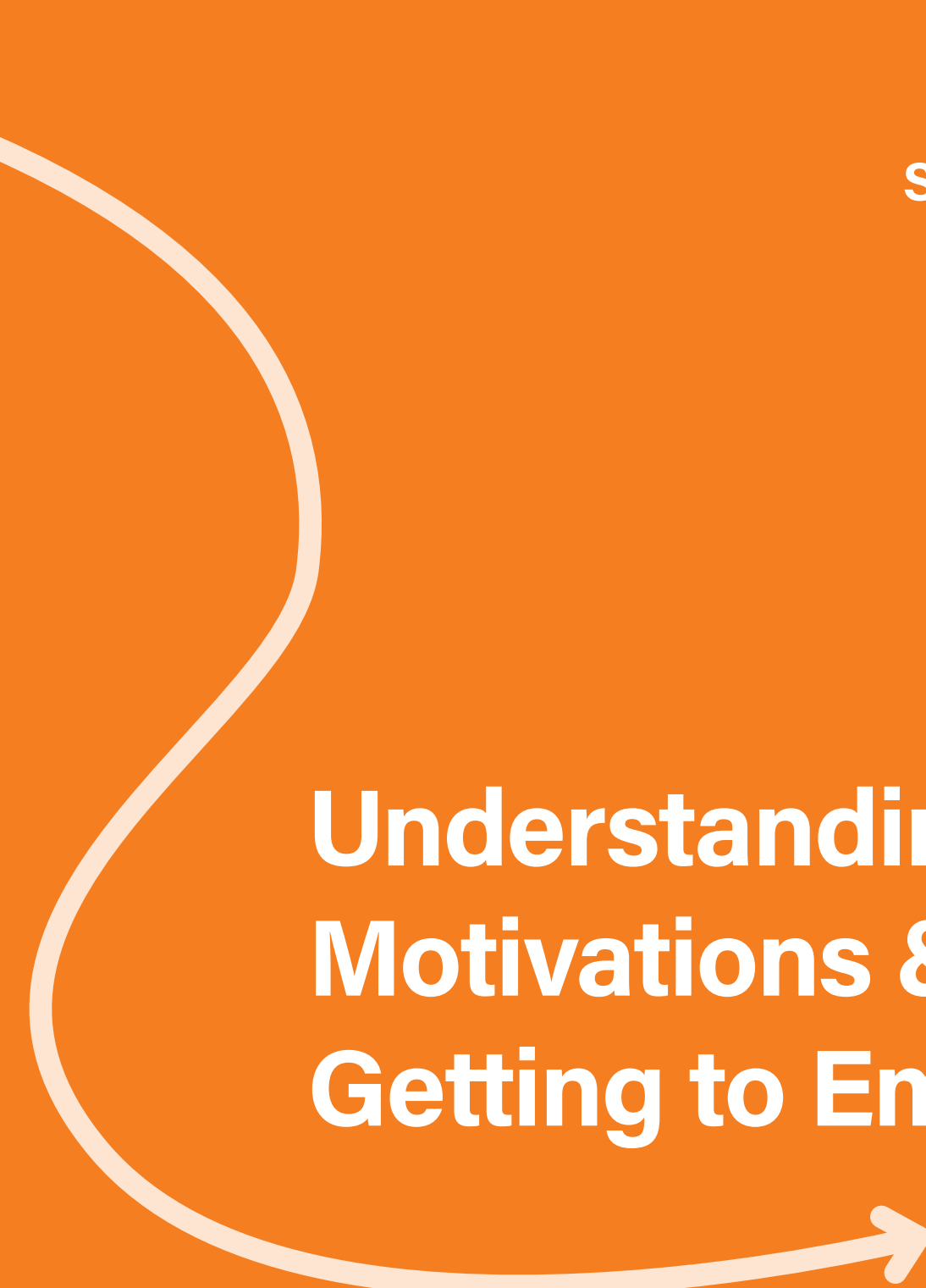
Sex trafficking involves the manipulation, coercion, and exploitation of youth who are forced into sex work by various means. Leadership within sex trafficking operations varies, with traffickers ranging from organized criminal networks to individual predators. The average age of recruitment for sex trafficking is 13-14 years old, and traffickers primarily recruit young women¹¹. The recruitment stages of sex trafficking often involve deception, manipulation, and the grooming of youth. Traffickers often pose as friends, lovers or romantic prospects, parental figures, or figures offering opportunities such as modelling recruiters, luring young people into a false sense of security and love-bombing them with affection and gifts. Given that posing as a friend or romantic partner is the most common form of recruitment, that means that youth can meet, and be recruited by traffickers in many social environments, including parties, shelters, malls, at their workplace or even at a bus stop. Online recruitment is also extremely common in sex trafficking, with traffickers reaching out to youth on social networks like Snapchat, Tinder, Kik and Facebook and through online multiplayer gaming platforms¹².

Intimate Partner Controlling Relationships

An Intimate Partner Controlling Relationship (IPCR) typically unfolds within a one-on-one, romantic context, where one partner exerts manipulative control over the other. IPCRs can also manifest in non-romantic, close-friend or familial relationships. Usually, IPCRs begin and escalate quickly, with the manipulator drawing in youth by love-bombing them—showering them with affection, gifts and compliments. Given that these are intimate partner relationships, the youth can meet and be recruited by a manipulator in any social situation, including parties, shelters, malls, at their workplace, school or even on the bus. They can also meet potential manipulators online, including on dating sites like Tinder, on social media sites, within social networks or on online gaming platforms.

11. <https://www.canadiancentretoendhumantrafficking.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/No-More-Ending-Sex-Trafficking-in-Canada.pdf>

12. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15248380211025241>



Understanding Motivations & Getting to Empathy

To best support youth under the influence of PM and CC, it is important to understand their motivations and the reasoning behind their involvement with their group or manipulator. This understanding will allow you to take an empathetic approach to the situation, even as it presents challenges. Understanding motivations can also help you connect with the young person with the important resources they might need if they exit their situation.

There are many reasons a young person might get involved in a manipulative group or relationship.

Here, we highlight five key motivations:

- › Community
- › Connection
- › Purpose
- › Identity
- › Development



Community

Human beings are naturally social. We are biologically wired to live in small, tight-knit communities. It is only recently in our 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 epidemic¹³. Establishing and nurturing stable communities that fulfill our social needs has become extremely challenging in today's complex world. Sometimes, youth benefit from a school-based community, but that is not always the case. When youth feel disconnected, it is not uncommon for them 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 youth 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 young people, particularly those dealing with feelings of isolation and detachment or those experiencing life changes and seeking support. Seeking community is also common for youth who have been rejected by their families or are dealing with abuse of some kind. Youth might seek community as a source of protection, comfort or empowerment in situations where they have been made to feel powerless.



Connection

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 youth spend more time on screens and alone in their homes, disconnected from friends, they move away from connection to each other, the planet and themselves. Manipulative groups and relationships offer connection on many different fronts. When youth 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 self-help group that promises self-actualization or healing, a hate group that offers an outlet for feelings of anger or injustice, or a romantic relationship that promises something deep and intimate. Either way, there is some connection on offer—to something emotional, spiritual, secret,

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

powerful or romantic. This sense of connection can be incredibly appealing to many young people, especially those feeling lonely, disconnected, powerless or disenfranchised.



Purpose

Most young 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. Young people dream big, 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 young people open to influence. Manipulative groups and individuals often promise a sense of purpose, either explicitly or implicitly. High-control groups of all kinds, as well as hate and conspiracy groups, often have a particular mission or set of values to spread that they believe will change the world for the better or, at the very least, change your life. Manipulative and abusive relationships and sex traffickers offer the purpose of caring for someone deeply and romantically. This aligns with the deep sense of purpose young people, especially women, are told they should get from their 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.



Identity

Young adulthood is a time of seeking. Most young people are trying to figure out who they are and who they want to be. Youth will often try many roles and relationships as they attempt to find the place where they feel the most happy and comfortable. Seeking identity¹⁴ is completely normal and should be encouraged. However, this state of uncertainty and experimentation can be destabilizing and open youth up to the possibility of manipulation. Manipulators use specific tactics designed to take advantage of everyone, both youth and adults alike. Still, the experimental nature of youth makes for particular susceptibility as young people may lack the ability to accurately assess manipulative situations and may lack the experience to differentiate between genuine connection and coercion. The need for social acceptance and belonging that comes with seeking identity is also particularly acute when we are young. This offers another possible pathway for manipulators to take advantage of youth by offering a deep sense of acceptance and belonging.

14. <https://actforyouth.net/adolescence/identity.cfm>

Developing Cognition

The desire to discover identity and belonging should always be encouraged. With loving guidance and support, youth can seek and experiment with different identities safely.

Youth, characterized by both external and internal transformations, is a time of exploration and self-discovery. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for decision-making and rational thinking, is still in the process of development during this period. More accurately, it's not fully myelinated¹⁵, leaving young adults more likely to behave impulsively and challenge authority. This lack of development also means youth are less experienced at fully understanding the consequences of their actions.

These inherent changes make youth particularly prone to risk-taking and experimentation. The allure of social acceptance¹⁶ is heightened as young people seek their place in the world. The underdeveloped connections to the prefrontal cortex, coupled with the desire for acceptance, can make manipulators seem appealing, especially when their tactics align with the youth's need for identity and belonging.

To support youth in navigating this complexity, a nuanced approach is essential. Sensitivity and understanding are needed to provide a stable and nurturing environment for growth, learning, and safe transformation. Recognizing that youth are still shaping their identities and understanding their place in the world allows us to offer guidance that fosters resilience and equips them with the tools to make informed decisions about their relationships and beliefs.

Getting to Empathy

The five factors of community, connection, purpose, identity and developing cognition allow us to better understand the motivations for involvement in and susceptibility to manipulative groups and relationships. But these categories are pretty broad and will only start you on the path to understanding.

See Counter's [Empathy Questionnaire for Youth](#) to dive deeper into the motivations of the youth you want to help. You can also use this questionnaire to explore key questions about your relationship with them and their involvement with the manipulative group or relationship. The [Empathy Questionnaire](#) is meant to offer clarity and direction when developing a plan for connection with youth under the influence of PM and CC

15. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3621648/>

16. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-7-things-to-know>

SECTION 07

Developing A Realistic Plan



When connecting with a young person under the influence of psychological manipulation and coercive control, it is crucial to understand that there is no quick fix. You must be prepared to take slow, small steps toward building a connection. Also, although it might be your goal to help them see that the situation they are in is damaging, you must be prepared to accept that it might take them time to exit. So, the first goal should always be building trust and connection to give them a safe space to land once they exit.

With each step you take in this process, it is essential to remember what is at stake for the young person. It is incredibly difficult to let go of firmly held beliefs or manipulative connections, especially when they are constantly reinforced by the group or relationship they are a part of. So your job here is not to yank them out of the situation immediately but to act as a guide: building trust, making connections, asking questions and planting seeds of ideas that can ultimately allow them to feel safe enough to exit in a healthy manner.

Developing a realistic plan involves outlining:

- › Goals
- › Boundaries & Limitations
- › Self-Care
- › Steps to Take



Goals

Outlining your goals is vital, as it allows you a better understanding of what you are looking for when connecting with the young person. When creating goals, it is important to keep them realistic.

An example of an unrealistic goal might be: "I want my child to immediately leave the manipulative situation." This is unrealistic because it does not consider how difficult it can be to extract someone from a manipulative situation. Part of undertaking this process means accepting that progress might be slow and trust must be built.

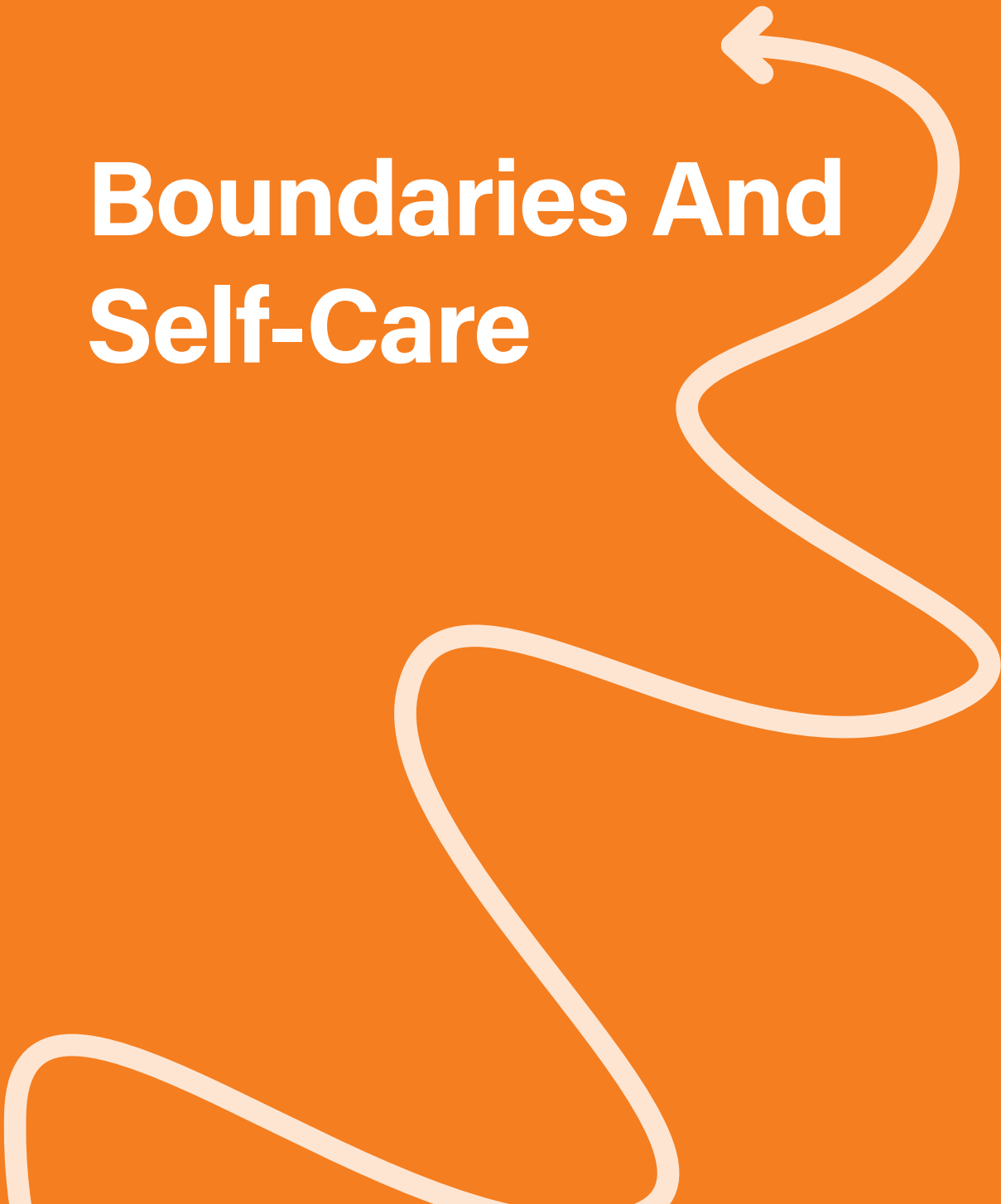
A more realistic goal might be: "I want to develop a connection with my child that involves them trusting me enough to share their feelings with me." This goal is realistic because it assumes that work needs to be done to build trust. It also has a specific action, sharing feelings, that is concrete and easy to identify.

Take some time now to generate some goals. Try to make them realistic and specific.

Here are some goals you might consider:

- › I want to gain a good understanding of the young person and their motivations for their involvement with the group or relationship.
- › I want to have a positive conversation with the young person.
- › I want to build trust with the young person to create a safe place for them to land when they exit.
- › I want to get to the point where I can ask the young person questions about their life without triggering defensiveness.
- › I want to help the young person exit their group or relationship on their own terms, in their own time.
- › I want to do an activity with the young person (bowling, a picnic, a walk, etc.) without conflict.
- › I want to allow the young person to question me without getting defensive or being judgemental. (Note: This can model open communication and welcome an environment where questioning is encouraged and celebrated.)

Boundaries And Self-Care



Trying to connect with a young person under the influence of PM and CC is challenging. Depending on their level of involvement with the manipulative situation, they might act in ways that hurt you or in some way negatively affect your life. They might also become a danger to themselves or others at some point, depending on the group or relationship they are involved with. Because of this, it is vital to create firm boundaries and practice good self-care while trying to help or connect.



Boundaries

Once you have created goals for communication with the young person it is important to identify your boundaries and limitations around interacting with them. Your boundaries and limitations depend on the situation and can (and probably will) change over time as the situation evolves.

Boundaries are things that you need in order to be safe and happy in your relationship with the young person. Your boundaries shouldn't put unreasonable demands or expectations on the young person. It is also important to note that if the youth is in your care or living in your home, creating boundaries may be extra challenging. In these cases, try your best to remain flexible and open to the needs of the young person while still maintaining your own safety and mental wellbeing.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when considering your boundaries:

- › What do I need in order to feel safe with the young person?
- › What do I need in order to keep supporting the young person?
- › How might my boundaries affect the young person?
- › Are my boundaries fair and reasonable?

When creating boundaries, it is vital to consider both practical and emotional limitations.

PRACTICAL BOUNDARIES

Living arrangements

If you live with the youth, you must consider what daily life looks like and what you need to be happy, safe and comfortable in your household. Remember that if they are in your care, you have authority in your home, but maintaining flexibility, privacy and autonomy for the youth is vital to building trust.

Financial limitations

If the young person is spending a lot of money because of the manipulative situation, you should consider protecting your finances, especially if they have access to shared funds or credit cards. Even if you think it will bring you closer to the young person, be mindful not to fund any purchases that might support their manipulative situation.

Other children and dependents

If you are responsible for the well-being of others and the young person under the influence, those dependents must be financially, physically and emotionally protected. You might need to create rules and boundaries to protect the other dependants from manipulative influence.

Personal safety

You must ensure that you are safe from the influence of the manipulator the young person is involved with. This includes physical safety, safety from potential recruitment or protection from legal issues associated with the group or relationship.

Communication limits

Set boundaries around how and when you will communicate about sensitive topics that might generate conflict. Also, set limits on the kind of information you are willing to share, as any personal information may be distorted and used against you.

Time management

Firmly limit the time spent dealing with or thinking about the manipulative situation.

Social interactions

Decide how involved you want to be with the manipulator or their circle. Establish limits on attending events or gatherings associated with the manipulative group or relationship. Try to avoid having the manipulator in your home.

Technology use

Consider limiting your electronic communications with the youth. Written messages can be used as a tool of manipulation by groups or individuals looking to turn someone against their friends and family. Consider changing your passwords to protect your data and set firm boundaries on using shared devices or accounts.

Professional life

Maintain firm boundaries between personal and professional life to protect your career. Establish limits on discussing personal matters at work, especially giving names or specifics of the youth's situation, as you don't know who might be connected to the manipulator or manipulative group.

Level of sacrifice

Set boundaries around how much you are willing to give up to connect with or help the young person. If the young person is your child or dependent, it will be incredibly difficult to take action that might seem to be working against them. But if they become abusive, or are in serious trouble or are at risk of harming others, it might be necessary to involve the authorities. In some cases, you might have to make the difficult choice to prioritize safety, and that can be done in sensitive, strategic and careful ways, but it doesn't make it any less challenging.

EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES**Abusive Behaviour**

If the young person is being belittled, gaslit or otherwise emotionally abused, it is not uncommon for them to do the same to those around them. Limit your exposure to this by setting firm boundaries and expectations around the way you wish to be treated and what you will tolerate.

Empathy without Endorsement

Empathy does not always mean endorsement of the behaviour of the young person. You can still find ways to understand and connect without endorsing the group or manipulator, or getting involved with the manipulative group or relationship yourself.

Emotional Support

Define when you most need help from others and create a network of people willing to lend emotional support. Included in

this network can be friends, family, therapists or social workers, peers in a similar situation, or any trusted individual.

Breathing Room

Trying to help or connect with the young person could be a draining experience. Set limits to give yourself space and time to breathe away from emotionally charged situations.

When setting your boundaries, try to be as clear as possible and include details about what you will do if the boundary is violated. Use this [boundary chart](#) to help you list your boundaries and limitations. Make sure you communicate the necessary boundaries clearly to the young person. It is important to model good boundary-setting and open up the lines of communication around boundaries.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

It's okay to say no.

Always take time to check in with yourself. Listen to your gut and say no as freely as you can.

Boundaries come with a cost.

You might feel guilty for setting a boundary, or the young person might feel upset. You may have difficulty maintaining your boundaries, depending on what they are. Whatever the cost, it is important to remember to reach out to your support network for help and to trust you are making the best choices you can, given the complexity of the situation.

When enforcing boundaries, be sure that you are safe to do so.

If you feel that you or someone you love is in danger, please reach out for help. If calling the authorities is not safe for you, please see [Appendix B](#) for police alternatives.

If the young person becomes aggressive, do not engage.

Make sure everyone is coming into any situation or conversation safely.

Document things if possible.

Keep records of incidents or interactions that may be relevant. Document any changes in circumstances that may affect your well-being. Keep the records safe and make sure no one else

has access to them. Documentation could be important for legal purposes.

When enforcing boundaries, be careful of triggers.

If the young person is in a high-control situation, intimate partner controlling relationship or being trafficked, they may be subject to many rules and limitations that they could be punished for breaking. Try to make sure you are firm but not harsh about your boundaries, and avoid blaming the young person as much as possible. The goal is to create a relationship in which they feel safe, and that involves being as gentle and flexible as possible without putting yourself at risk.

If you are struggling to define your boundaries, consider talking to a PM and CC-informed therapist.

Find a PM and CC-trained therapist in the [resources](#) section on Counter's website.



Self-Care

Caring for yourself as you try to connect with a young person is vital. In this context, self-care means setting firm boundaries, taking time for yourself, coming to acceptance and getting what you need from the situation.

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is an important part of caring for yourself. You must understand that connecting with the young person will take time or might not happen at all. You must also accept that your relationship with the youth has changed. Depending on their [stage of involvement](#), you may have lost contact with the young person altogether. Either way, things have changed and may never be the same. Coming to acceptance of this may involve mourning the loss of the relationship and reframing your expectations about the future. Reframing expectations can involve setting new [goals](#) and creating firm [boundaries](#).

For help with the process of acceptance, look for a therapist who has been trained in PM and CC, or a family therapist who is trauma-informed and familiar with youth care. If they are not PM and CC trained, direct them to Counter's Toolkits for [Identifying and Countering](#) as well as [Recovery](#) from Psychological Manipulation and Coercive Control.

Consider Your Needs

When trying to help or connect with a youth under the influence of PM and CC, it is easy to get swept away from yourself. Thoughts and worries about them and their situation can take over. It is important to make sure you focus on your needs in the situation, whatever they may be. Take some time to generate a list of your needs. These could be anything, small or large. Remember that you must help yourself as well as them. It would be useful to reach out to someone you trust to aid in the process of defining your needs. They might be able to help you see things that you cannot see yourself, as you might be too close to the situation. If the young person lives in your home, it will be especially important to get an outside perspective.

Make Time for Yourself

Remember, when possible, to set time aside for self-care and activities that bring you joy and do not involve the young person or the manipulative situation. This can be enforced by your time management boundaries. Exercise, good food, fun activities and supportive and safe relationships are essential to keeping you healthy, happy and able to keep working towards reconnection with the young person.

Feel Your Feelings

Sometimes, the situation with the young person will make you frustrated, angry, anxious, sad, hopeful, hopeless, heartbroken or any number of other feelings. Allow yourself to feel whatever you need to feel. Although it's important to remain as positive and supportive as possible with the young person, do not suppress your negative feelings, as they are valid and necessary. It is also vital to not hide your feelings completely from the young person, as modelling healthy expression of feelings is important, and it would be unnatural if you never expressed anything beyond positivity. If needed, reach out to your support network or a therapist for validation and support to help you explore some of the deeper and more extreme feelings that arise.

Give Yourself Credit

Connecting with someone under the influence of PM and CC is challenging work. It takes patience, perseverance and lots of

love. Remember, you are incredibly brave and loving to engage in this work. Give yourself credit where it is due, and take some time to celebrate yourself.

Let Go (If Necessary)

The most difficult act of self-care is to recognize that, if necessary, it is okay to step away. As hard as that might be, it is important to remember that option. If the young person is abusing you, or their situation puts you in a violent or dangerous situation, or if your mental or physical health (or someone else's) is at risk, it might be time to step away from the situation or involve the authorities. If you need to step away, take some time to get the space and perspective you need. In some cases, it will be safe to return; in others, it won't. If this option is necessary, remember that it is not your fault. PM and CC are caused by dangerous manipulators taking advantage of people. You cannot be expected to put yourself in harm's way for the sake of trying to help. If you need to involve the authorities, there are some considerations involved. See [Section 9](#) for more details.

Sometimes, walking away or taking space is not an option, for example, if the young person depends on you or lives in your home. In this case, you must work to keep firm boundaries, and it is advisable to seek help from a [mental health professional](#) who is PM and CC-informed.

Creating a Connection



It can be incredibly challenging to connect with a young person under the influence of PM and CC. You might feel anger, hurt, frustration, loss, sadness—all with good reason. It can sometimes feel like every conversation is a fight or that they are slipping away.

Although it is difficult, it is possible to create a connection with them. Though it will require patience, compassion and understanding.

Creating a connection is a vital step in working to help a young person exit a manipulative group or relationship.

Here, we will discuss four steps to creating a connection:

- › Step 1 - Reflection
- › Step 2 - Listening
- › Step 3 - Baseline
- › Step 4 - Stability

Step 1 - Reflection

The first step in creating a connection is internal. It is crucial for you to come to a place of acceptance about the situation before you can help a young person. They have changed. You may have even lost the person you knew them to be. Your connection with them has also changed. But it doesn't have to be the end of the story. We can still find value in loss and change, which could be an opportunity for you to find a deeper understanding and a more profound (though different) connection with them.

After setting realistic **goals**, creating **boundaries** and developing good self-care, the next step is to ask yourself if you are ready. Creating a connection with a young person under the influence will require a level head and a great deal of patience, and if you have not come to a place where you are ready to be open and listen, then your efforts might have less of a chance of success. If you feel you are ready, it's time to take the next step toward connection.

Step 2 - Listening

The second step is listening. Be curious, genuinely. When people are under the influence of PM and CC, they can tend towards extreme defensiveness if their beliefs or relationships are questioned.

Remember that you are **not trying to get the young person to leave their manipulative situation.** You are only trying to establish trust and provide a safe, non-judgmental place for them to connect with you.

Things to consider during your moments of connection with a young person:

- › **Work towards understanding.** Use Counter's **Empathy Questionnaire** to find help getting a deeper understanding of the young person and their life.
- › **Try to find points of agreement.** If you feel what they feel or agree with a point they are making, tell them. This is a way to establish a basis of alignment and find the points where you connect. It will help you both feel more comfortable that you have common ground.
- › **No facts, data or numbers.** Sometimes, you might want to argue with something the young person says, but remember

that any facts, numbers or other points of view will likely just shut them down and could even entrench them further. There might come a point once trust is established that they are open to other viewpoints; we will explore that in [Section 10](#), but in the listening phase, just stick to open questions and points of agreement.

- › **Back off if there is resistance.** If you encounter resistance at any point in a moment of connection, it is important to take a step back until it is resolved. Remember, you are building trust and openness, and that cannot happen if the young person retreats in anger or fear.

Note: Sometimes, a young person might have cut you off completely. If they lived with you, they might have left home and moved in with their manipulator or group. This is extremely challenging and heartbreaking. If this has happened to you, there are options.

- › **Acceptance:** Non-judgementally accept their disconnection with an open invitation that you will always be there to listen and welcome them back. When in conversation with a youth under the influence, avoid using phrases like “I don’t understand,” “I’d like to understand,” or “if you choose to leave.” Often, manipulators will enforce the idea that those on the outside of the group or relationship don’t understand those on the inside, so saying you don’t understand them can trigger that counter-narrative. Also, the suggestion that they might leave the group or manipulator might seem like an attack or judgement. Some alternative phrases include: “Could you explain that?”, “Could you tell me more about that?” or “I’m here if you need me.” Avoid anything that can be perceived as a judgement. The goal is to communicate to the young person that they have a soft and safe place to land should they choose to leave or question their group or relationship without saying that directly. Reach out to [Counter](#) or another professional organization for further suggestions on next steps and support. .
- › **Authorities:** If you believe the young person is in danger and the group or manipulator might be engaging in illegal activities, you can contact the authorities. If possible, try to reach out through an organization that is PM and CC-informed to ensure the situation is treated with the

appropriate care. Attempts to help the young person in this way carry the risk of alienating them further, as the group or manipulator will likely see this as a form of attack and use this as evidence that you are against them. Also, PM and CC are not well understood by the law, and it is often necessary to find evidence of other crimes, such as fraud or trafficking, in order to convict. It is also important to keep in mind that the young person might have become a perpetrator through coercion (if they are being trafficked or forced into some other sort of criminal activity) and might face criminal charges if the authorities are involved. In cases of trafficking, cities will usually have specialized authorities to deal with these cases so try to reach out to those departments directly. In the case of hate groups or violent extremism, some cities will have specialized departments. See [Counter's resources](#) page for more details, or look up a specialized police department or organization in your area. It is recommended to reach out to [Counter](#) or another professional organization for support in this process.

Step 3 - Baseline

Once you have established trust in Step 2, the third step is establishing a baseline, a shared understanding of how you can connect. This process should be framed as a collaboration, not a conflict, something you can work on together. You should always get consent to start a conversation like this because if the young person is not open to it at the time, it won't go anywhere. Remember that during this time, you want to create a stronger connection with them and overcome any conflict that might arise.

Some questions/explorations in this step might be:

- › How do we want to be around each other?
- › How can we co-develop boundaries and respect them?
- › What values do we share?
- › What shared activities can we engage in that we enjoy?
- › What boundaries do we want to make in regard to our points of conflict?
- › How can we best support each other?

Consider each question a conversation, something to build on over time. Conversations about these topics shouldn't be too lengthy. If a disagreement comes up and you have

counterpoints, make sure to get consent before sharing them.

Throughout this process, you should...

- › ...keep your own boundaries and limits in mind.
- › ...always get consent.
- › ...stay non-judgemental.
- › ...be genuinely curious.
- › ...try to avoid defensiveness.
- › ...be patient & present.
- › ...remind them you love them.
- › ...thank them for talking with you.

Step 4 - Stability

Once you have built trust and established a baseline, it is vital to maintain stability in your connection with the young person. If you can develop a trusting and stable connection, it will be possible to start planting seeds to help them examine their feelings about the manipulative relationship or group.

CONSISTENCY

Consistent connection is essential. To build trust, you have to be present. If you are only in the young person's life periodically and without regularity, you will not be able to lay a firm foundation of trust. When establishing your boundaries, make sure that you define the time you are willing to give to the young person and then follow through. It could be a daily meal, a weekly adventure, or a consistent schedule for phone check-ins if you are distant.

Consistency in the nature of your interactions is also vital. If the young person is under the influence of PM and CC, it is likely that they will be dealing with a lot of inconsistency with their manipulator, including gaslighting and shifting moods and rules. By creating a stable set of boundaries and keeping your interactions consistent, you can provide them with a safe environment which can encourage trust and openness.

OPENNESS

Openness includes flexibility and a non-judgemental approach to connecting with the young person. If you are working to build a connection with your child or youth under your care, it is essential that you do not limit their behaviour too firmly. If they

are under the influence of PM or CC, they might have to contend with many rules that control their lives in various ways. By providing an open and flexible environment, you can allow them the autonomy they might not otherwise have and the freedom to start to come to their own realizations about their situation.

It is also vital to take a non-judgemental approach. Embrace genuine curiosity. Avoid phrases like: "I don't understand," as they can be alienating. Instead, focus on gentle questioning and curiosity about the young person's motivations and feelings. See more about cultivating openness in the [building connection](#) section.

MODELLING

Modelling open and loving relationships can go a long way to helping the young person feel comfortable and connected.

Here are some suggestions for positive modelling:

- › **Admit Wrong:** Seek opportunities to admit you are wrong, explain and apologize if necessary. Manipulators thrive when they create an environment where they are always right. Modelling accountability and being wrong gracefully is important to help the young person see that mistakes are natural and normal.
- › **Encourage Questioning:** Be open and honest when the young person asks a question*. Manipulators often keep secrets and hoard knowledge, and often discourage questioning through punishment or threats. By modelling openness, you can help the young person see that honesty is part of a good relationship.
- › **Show Gratitude:** If the young person does something kind or thoughtful, express gratitude. Make sure you are not singling them out though, and that same gratitude is extended to everyone in your orbit so you don't seem disingenuous.
- › **Express Boundaries:** Often, in situations of PM and CC, the person being manipulated will have no chance to express boundaries or say no freely. Modelling the expression of boundaries should be done in a way that is both kind and firm to show that boundaries do not have to be problematic

and can be healthy.

***Note:** While being open and honest is important, keep in mind that personal details may be used against you by the manipulator. Use your judgment and maintain your boundaries around disclosure.

PLANTING SEEDS

Once you have laid the groundwork for a stronger, more trusting and understanding relationship, you will want to start gently trying to help the young person question their involvement with the manipulative group or relationship. This process is slow and challenging. It would be best to get external help with this. A family or individual therapist trained in PM and CC can help the young person get to the root of their involvement with the group or relationship and explore their feelings in a more objective setting. However, sometimes help isn't available, so in the next section, we will explore methods of countering PM and CC.

SECTION 10



**Countering
PM and 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

A trusting and non-judgmental environment must be established before undertaking intervention. A young person must feel at least somewhat free to share their emotions and experiences with you. Assure them that you are there to support and not criticize them, and they will not be punished or judged for their involvement with the group or manipulator. Ensure you have completed the steps in [Section 9](#) and explored the section on [building connection](#) before proceeding with intervention.

2 EMPATHETIC & OPEN LISTENING

The goal with any young person 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 youth to guide conversations and activities as much as possible 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. Avoid phrases like “I don’t understand,” “I want to understand,” or “I’m confused,” as they could trigger feeling misunderstood. Claiming the world outside will never understand is a common tactic manipulators use to convince those under their influence that the rest of the world will never understand them, and that they can only find belonging in the group or relationship.

3 ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

In manipulative situations, questioning is often discouraged. Create a safe environment to explore and allow the young person to reflect on their situation by asking broad, open-ended questions. This can help them consider 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?
- › Have you noticed any changes in your other relationships since you got involved with the group or relationship? 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 imagine your future in relation to your involvement with this group/relationship?
- › What are some of the ideas or beliefs that you've adopted since becoming a part of this group/relationship? How are they different from your old ideas 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 young person 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 manipulation framework. 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 distanced exploration:

- › 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 will often exploit a young person's feelings, using them as a tool for increased control. This manipulation frequently manifests as invalidation of the young person'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 young person's excitement, interest or passion for ideas, goals or people that don't fit with the group or relationship. This is done to increase dependency, reduce outside interests, and encourage the youth to conform. Youth can also face invalidation from the outside when concerned friends or family invalidate their positive feelings or excitement about the group or manipulator. By openly recognizing and validating the young person's emotions, you can model healthy relationship dynamics and foster the young person's self-trust. Ensuring that the young person can acknowledge 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 young person 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.

Keep in mind that validating the young person's emotions does not mean that you have to agree with them, understand them or even condone the associated behaviours. Emotions themselves are not the behaviours or beliefs, they are not objectively wrong or right. So it is possible to support the young person and their feelings but not support the manipulative situation. This is a complicated distinction, but an important one. For more information on finding the balance see Section 8 on boundaries and self-care.

5 PROVIDE INFORMATION

Often, young people 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 young person 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 relationships as manipulative. Information on PM and CC may also trigger defensiveness, fear or mistrust. Because of this, it is important to present this information non-judgmentally and only when you are confident that the young person is receptive and prepared to absorb it.

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

- › **Expressed Curiosity or Concern:** If the youth has shown curiosity or concern about their situation or has asked questions related to manipulation, this could indicate an openness to learning more. They might have already been exposed to some information about manipulation on social media or through some other kind of media but might not have recognized the connections yet.
- › **Acknowledgment of Negative Feelings:** If the young person 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 young person 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 young person has mentioned a desire for change, 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 young person engaging in more critical thinking or asking deeper questions about their experiences, they may be ready for more information about PM and CC.
- › **Seeking Help or Support:** If the young person has actively sought advice, guidance, or support from others, it may indicate a willingness to learn and consider different perspectives.
- › **Decreased Defensiveness:** If the young person's defensiveness or resistance seems lessened, they might be more open to receiving information.
- › **Building Trust:** If you have established a strong relationship and deep trust with the youth, they may be more inclined to listen to your insights and recommendations.¹⁷
- › **Emotional Readiness:** If the young person seems 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 young people 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 young person has something at risk or has lost something significant, they may be ready to reexamine their involvement with the group or manipulator.

6 EMPOWER CRITICAL & COMPLEX THINKING

Often, part of the appeal of 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. This can make young people feel safe, empowered and in control. Creating an environment that encourages critical and complex thinking can help young people 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 young person is highly defensive.

17. You can't rely on a previous relationship to be the basis of trust. Depending on their [stage of involvement](#), the young person might be a different person than they were before the group or relationship. You will need to rebuild trust with this "new" young person for information to be considered.

If the youth 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 young person to think deeper about their beliefs and the consequences of their actions.
- › **Explore Motivations:** Help the youth 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 young person 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 young person 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 connected with. These examples of successful decision-making can help the young person 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 young person to learn independently and make informed decisions. This information could be in any form: social media posts, videos, fiction, or otherwise. As long as the information is accurate and relevant. See the [resources page](#) on Counter's website for more details about reputable resources.

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 young person. In exit counselling for high-control group members and hate groups, 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 foster¹⁸¹⁹²⁰. Real-life examples of exit and recovery from psychologically manipulative groups and relationships can inspire hope and show 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 people²¹. Exposure to other people and viewpoints in a low-stakes or safe environment could be helpful to acclimatize youth to new ways of thinking and plant seeds for thought, exploration and growth.

8 AVOID COMPLEX IDEOLOGY

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

When helping a young person, especially when asking open-ended questions, sharing information, and empowering critical and complex thinking, it is essential to steer clear of the group or manipulator's ideology. Instead, focus on discussions about the youth's personal feelings, experiences, and thoughts. This can be challenging as the young person might fear potential repercussions for straying from the prescribed language and

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

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

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

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

concepts they've absorbed from the group or manipulator.

Here are some ways to avoid ideology while helping youth:

- › **Keep it Simple:** Use straightforward language that avoids triggering pre-programmed counter-ideology responses, such as clichés, idioms, or stereotypes.
- › **Rephrase Complex Ideas:** Encourage the young person 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. Remember to avoid saying you don't understand them, though. Instead, try asking them to simply rephrase the idea.
- › **Stay Grounded:** Gently guide the conversation back to present realities, practical matters, their emotions, or aspects they can control whenever they start using excessive ideological jargon.

By carefully steering the young person away from ideological engagement, you can help create a safe space for meaningful communication and reflection. This can help youth to gradually break free from the grip of complex ideologies and develop more clarity of thought.

9 SAFE EXIT PLANNING

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

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

- › **Assess the Situation:** Help the young person 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:** If the youth is not in your home, or they have lost touch with loved ones, help them develop a plan to reach out to friends, family, or trusted individuals

who can provide emotional support and assistance. This may involve reconnecting and rebuilding relationships. If needed, connect the young person with support groups, specialized counsellors, or helplines specializing in manipulation and abuse.

- › **Gather Information:** If needed, help the young person 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 young person to assess their financial situation and explore options for financial independence if necessary, such as opening a bank account or securing a source of income.
- › **Secure Essential Documents:** Encourage the young person 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 young person choose a safe time and place to leave if they are living with the manipulator, 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 young person to inform their trusted support network about their decision to leave and share their safety plan. Help the young person develop a code word or signal to alert their network if they are in danger or need immediate assistance.
- › **Secure Online Presence:** Encourage the young person 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 young person in obtaining restraining orders or protection orders, if needed, to restrict the manipulator's access to them legally.

- › **Pack Essentials:** Help the young person prepare an essentials list that includes clothing, medication, personal items, and important documents.
- › **Notify Authorities:** Encourage the young person 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 young person prepare a list of Police alternatives. See [Appendix B](#) for a list of police alternatives.
- › **Maintain No-Contact:** If possible, encourage the young person 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 young person's safety plan based on changing circumstances.

10 ENCOURAGE & EXPLORE COMMUNITY, CONNECTION AND PURPOSE

Each young person's reason for involvement in a group or relationship is distinct, and it's important to acknowledge and understand their motivations. As you help a young person to exit a manipulative situation, work with them to identify alternative, healthy outlets for community, connection, and purpose. By addressing their original motivations and helping them cultivate a new sense of fulfilment 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 Counter's website for links to programs that support community, connection and purpose.

11 GIVE PERMISSION

Sometimes, a young person 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. If the youth is your child or under your care, you might also need to demand they leave, so they have an excuse to walk away. This must be carefully negotiated. It's also essential to exercise caution and awareness of the situation. Prioritize safety planning, especially in the case of dangerous or potentially violent groups or relationships.

SECTION 11



Prevention

Prevention plays a crucial role in countering psychological manipulation and coercive control. When working with youth, prevention involves bolstering resilience, minimizing vulnerability and cultivating knowledge and good communication.

In this section, we will cover:

- › Building connection
- › Exploring community, connection and purpose
- › Education



Building Connection

In order for a young person to feel comfortable opening up and sharing their lives and struggles, it is vital to build a connection with them. Ideally, this should be done early in life, if you are a primary caregiver, in order to foster an environment of curiosity, joy and connectivity.

Here, we will explore some ideas to help build connection.

DISCOVER THEIR INTERESTS

Understanding and engaging with the interests of the young person is an important first step in establishing an authentic connection. By taking the time to discover what interests and inspires them, you can build a foundation of trust and support and find new ways to connect. Pay close attention to their conversations, and look for verbal and non-verbal cues. What topics make their eyes light up? What activities spark enthusiasm and active participation?

Asking open-ended questions to learn more can also be helpful. Here are some questions that can serve as a starting point for discovery. When asking these questions, be sure that you are doing so in a non-judgemental manner and are open and receptive to any answer they may offer. If you don't have a history of engagement on this level, be sure to build up to questioning with a single question, as opposed to asking everything at once. Questions and conversation could feel like an interrogation if the youth is unused to interest at this level, so be sure to take it slow and really listen to their responses.

- › What activities cause you to lose track of time?
- › What excited you the most about today?
- › What does a perfect day look like to you?
- › What ideas have interested you the most lately?
- › Have you watched anything interesting recently?
- › Have you read anything good lately?
- › What have you done that you are proud of recently?
- › What did you learn this week that surprised you?
- › If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go, and what would you do there?
- › What goals or dreams do you have for the future?

SHARE THEIR INTERESTS

Once you've identified the young person's interests, the next step to building a strong connection is actively engaging with them on their level. This involves not only acknowledging their passions but also participating in activities that resonate with them. Sharing their interests is about actively participating and demonstrating your commitment to understanding their world. Be prepared to step outside of your comfort zone and embrace new experiences. This willingness to try new things communicates a genuine interest in their world and a commitment to building a meaningful connection. While it's important to enjoy the process, remember that the goal is to share and connect, fostering an environment of mutual understanding.

When planning, ensure that shared activities are youth-led or, at the very least, a collaborative effort. This approach empowers the young person to take charge of their experiences, fostering a sense of autonomy and authority over their time. Collaborating on activities allows them to shape their environment, reinforcing the message that their preferences and choices are respected. Engaging in shared activities provides a unique opportunity to connect with the young person on their terms. By participating in their interests, you gain valuable insights into their life, preferences, and worldview. Through your openness to trying the things they enjoy, you not only build trust but also communicate that their interests and passions hold genuine value for you. This reinforces the message that their individuality matters and contributes to the foundation of a trusting and supportive relationship.

If you struggle to find shared activities, here are some suggestions:

- › **Do Art:** Take a class, watch a YouTube tutorial or head to an art store (or dollar store) to find supplies and inspiration.
- › **Explore Nature:** Go to a park, a ravine, or a beach or head out of town to find some nature to explore. Take pictures, look up tree facts or discover types of clouds. Notice all the sounds, smells and sights.
- › **Play a Video Game:** Work together to find a video game you

both will enjoy or try one the youth finds engaging.

- › **Watch or Listen:** Watch a video, movie, show or listen to a podcast together. Ask questions and engage in open-minded conversation about the content.
- › **Do Science:** Find some fun and easy science experiments online and try them. The messier and weirder, the better.
- › **Read a Book:** Read out loud together or go to a coffee shop and read quietly. Then, discuss what you just read.
- › **Ask Questions:** There are many question card games available online. Order a youth-friendly deck and play.
- › **Plant Something:** Find a community garden, plant a pepper seed in some soil or grow something in your own backyard. Look up best practices to keep your plants alive and thriving.
- › **Do Sports:** Engage with whatever sport or physical activity excites the youth. Keep yourself safe, though; be sure to stretch and drink lots of water.
- › **Be Kind:** Collect money or items to give to charity, make care packages for people who need them, donate to a community pantry or library, pick up trash in a local park, or get some sidewalk chalk and write nice things in front of people's houses. A little bit of kindness goes a long way.
- › **Bake or Cook Something:** Find a new recipe and make some delicious food. Share the meal or baked goods and chat about the process.
- › **Get Curious:** Pose a question: "What have you always wanted to learn about?" Pick something. Then go to the library, or online, or to a relevant institution and learn together. This activity is a great way to promote critical thinking and curiosity, skills vital to countering PM and CC.

ALTERNATIVES TO PUNISHMENT

If you are the primary caregiver for the youth, you do have some control and say in their lives, but that comes with responsibility. Harsh or seemingly arbitrary punishment for mistakes or problematic behaviour could push a young person further away. If they are under the influence of PM and CC, this could cause further alienation as they turn to the group or manipulator for solace or validation. Alternatives to standard punishment allow for a deeper relationship of trust and mutual understanding.

When looking for more effective alternatives, communication is vital. Try to facilitate open and honest conversations where everyone feels heard and understood. This will create an atmosphere of transparency and collaboration. Active listening is also an important practice. By acknowledging and validating the emotions the youth is experiencing, you can foster a supportive environment where they feel genuinely understood and valued.

Here are some suggestions for alternatives to punishment that aim to foster trust, communication, a shared understanding of responsibility and a focus on growth:

- › **Collaborative Problem Solving:** By involving the young person in the collaborative process of addressing challenges, you can not only empower them but also instill a sense of responsibility for their actions. Co-learning is essential in this process. By learning together about the issues, mistakes and detriments of their actions, you can work with the young person to co-create solutions and more positive outcomes.
- › **Collaborative Goal Setting:** Youth are much more motivated to work towards goals they have set themselves. In situations of PM and CC, and in general, youth may feel they lack agency and control. Allowing them to take the lead on setting goals and working towards them can encourage autonomy and foster the freedom to choose.
- › **Shifting Perspectives on Mistakes:** Viewing mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning, rather than as reasons for punishment promotes resilience and a positive attitude toward self-improvement. This may involve conversation, co-learning and finding collaborative solutions.

For more on alternatives to punishment see the Youth Resources section on [Counter's website](#).

DISCUSS PM AND CC

Once you have worked to build connection, you can explore the topics of PM and CC with the young person. Here are some suggestions on how to do so:

- › **Provide Resources:** Share reputable sources of information about tactics of psychological manipulation and coercive control. This allows the young person to learn independently and make informed decisions. This information could be in any form: social media posts, videos, fiction, or otherwise. As long as the information is accurate and relevant. See the [resources page](#) on Counter's website for more details about reputable resources or share and discuss Counter's [Red Flags List](#). Encourage shared exploration and open discussion about the information.
- › **Ask Questions:** Move from general or [discovery questions](#) to more direct questions about their beliefs, moral values and the things they are exposed to, especially online. When asking questions, or engaging in conversation, be sure to remain non-judgemental and open. Encouraging youth to ask their own questions and come to their own conclusions about things is important and fosters empowerment, autonomy and critical thinking.
- › **Share Your Opinion:** If something is worrying you, speak up. Keep your message clear and non-judgemental and don't put the blame on the youth. Treat them with respect and show that you value their opinions, thoughts and judgements.

Explore Community, Connection and Purpose

To help minimize vulnerability to PM and CC and promote resilience, it is vital to help youth explore and develop a robust sense of community connection and purpose.

COMMUNITY

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

Work to help youth find and engage with supportive and enriching communities. By offering them 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 PM and CC.

To help youth foster a sense of community, you can:

- › Help them 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 youth support groups that align with their challenges. However, ensure the support groups are vetted, as support groups sometimes be toxic and manipulative²².
- › Recommend community centers, libraries, or cultural centers where they can take workshops and classes and get involved with activities that generate healthy community connections.
- › Help them find healthy and safe religious or spiritual organizations that offer a sense of community and shared values.
- › Connect them with mentorship programs that can provide guidance and support.
- › Suggest they organize a neighbourhood gathering, potluck, or community event.
- › If the young person is in school, help them identify school groups and other supports that will help them connect with students and staff.

22. See Counter's [red flags list](#) for more details.

CONNECTION

Disconnection is a critical problem²³²⁴²⁵, exacerbated by a 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 youth grappling with feelings of isolation and a lack of purpose, making them vulnerable to manipulation.

We must work to help guide youth 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 better shield youth from misinformation and vitriol online by encouraging real-world interactions and facilitating real-life connections and exposure to a real diversity of thought. We must also help youth 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.

To help youth foster a sense of connection, you can:

- › Help them find ways to overcome financial insecurity through government programs or assistance and planning steps to find stable employment if necessary.
- › Help them define, understand and practice healthy interpersonal relationship dynamics.
- › Encourage them to reconnect with nature by exploring nearby parks and natural spaces.
- › Help them 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 them find reliable and unbiased sources of information and news.

23. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211124/dq211124e-eng.htm>

24. <https://www.cNBC.com/2020/01/23/loneliness-is-rising-younger-workers-and-social-media-users-feel-it-most.html>

25. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/public-engagement/unlock-loneliness/loneliness-young-people-research-briefing>

- › Encourage them to maintain strong and weak ties as well. Weak ties can be an important source of connection²⁶ and meaningful interaction²⁷.

PURPOSE

Most young 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 youth without a sense of purpose, making them susceptible to the promises of manipulative groups or individuals.

Focus on helping youth discover 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.

To help youth foster a sense of purpose, you can:

- › Encourage them 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 them identify their core values. Exploring values can serve as a foundation for finding purpose.
- › Encourage them to connect with others with diverse perspectives and purposes to get a sense of the breadth of possibility.
- › Explore the possibility of various types 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.

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

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



Education

- › Encourage them to explore without the pressure of immediately finding a specific purpose. Purpose often emerges gradually through experimentation; therefore, it shouldn't be forced.

Education is key to countering PM and CC, but accessibility and quality of education is important. Access to accurate information about the signs of PM and CC and the development of critical thinking skills is essential for teaching young people to make informed decisions and counter manipulation.

Education that can help youth 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, fulfilment and connection.

Look for reliable, factual information on these topics in schools, through community services and online. Be sure that this information is vetted and aligns with the values of inclusion, openness and accessibility to all.

Recovery



Once a young person has exited a situation involving PM and CC, there is much to be considered around recovery. The first considerations must be practical. The youth must have basic needs met, such as food, shelter, and supportive connections (especially if they were physically isolated). They might need help gaining financial independence, finding employment or enrolling/re-enrolling in school 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 youth has been 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 youth may be suffering from the traumatic experience with the group or manipulator. They may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, or PTSD²⁸. 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 the Counter website, and see Counter's [Toolkit for Recovery](#) for more information.

28. 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 suggested until a youth has a chance to heal and regain a sense of self, as other diagnoses may mask the underlying trauma cause and prevent healing. https://cewh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2013_TIP-Guide.pdf - pg. 15 - section 2.5

SECTION 13

**Violent
Extremism**



In some cases youth under the influence of PM and CC can become perpetrators of violence. These are cases of violent extremism. If a young person you know 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. If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, you should contact the authorities. 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 the [resources](#) section on our website for further support.

Appendix



 **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:** Begin with questions that help clarify the young person'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. **Examine Assumptions:** Encourage the young person 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. **Explore Reasons and Evidence:** Ask questions that prompt the youth 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. **Consider Alternative Viewpoints:** Introduce alternative perspectives or viewpoints related to the topic. Encourage the youth to consider other ways of thinking and explore the implications of these alternatives.
5. **Examine Implications and Consequences:** Ask questions that help the young person 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. **Question the Original Belief:** Guide the young person 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. **Summary and Reflection:** Conclude the Socratic questioning process by asking the youth to summarize their insights and reflect on what they have learned through the inquiry. Encourage them to draw conclusions based on their exploration of the topic.

Throughout the process, you should aim to create a collaborative

and nonjudgmental atmosphere that fosters open dialogue and exploration. The questions should be carefully tailored to guide the young person's thinking without leading them to a specific answer. Socratic questioning encourages self-discovery and empowers young people to develop critical thinking skills and arrive at well-considered conclusions. Remember to only engage in this with young people who are willing and able to challenge themselves. If they are not ready to do so, this process may make them defensive or shut down.

Appendix B

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

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."