



# Red Flags for



**Psychological  
Manipulation &  
Coercive Control**



# **Red Flags for Psychological Manipulation and Coercive Control**

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## Introduction

**In today's complex** social landscape, psychological manipulation (PM) and coercive control (CC) pose a significant threat to people's autonomy and well-being. From hate groups to conspiracy, high-control groups to sex trafficking and intimate partner controlling relationships, the tactics of PM and CC permeate our world and cause harm through various means. To help those affected by PM and CC and to prevent involvement with manipulative groups and relationships, we must get a better understanding of both the tactics and the groups and individuals that use them.

This is a comprehensive list of Red Flags for Psychological Manipulation and Coercive Control. It is meant to equip people with knowledge of red flags and give a detailed understanding of groups and relationships that use the tactics of PM and CC. This list is designed to be used with our toolkits to foster a deeper understanding of PM and CC and help people work towards countering, prevention and recovery.

### **Our toolkits include:**

- › [Toolkit for Identifying & Countering Psychological Manipulation & Coercive Control](#)
- › [Toolkit for Recovery from Psychological Manipulation & Coercive Control](#)
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# **Red Flags**



## Complex Rules Systems

**Manipulative groups or individuals** may have complex rules and systems that others must follow. This could include systems to ascend through the group ranks or get closer to the leader. There might be an aspect of punishment or reward involved. In the case of religious or spiritual high-control groups, there might be an aspect of divinity, with various rituals that need to be undertaken. It might also include monitoring and surveillance (digital or in-person), mandatory disclosure requirements or self or inter-group policing to ensure compliance. A group or manipulator may also constantly change the rules to destabilize the Person Under Influence (PUI) and keep them in a continuous state of atonement. If a PUI feels they have broken the rules, they may be willing to go to extremes to prove themselves: their love, worthiness or commitment. In such an unpredictable environment, PUI's come to doubt and mistrust themselves and rely more heavily on the rules of the group or manipulator for a sense of self-worth and stability.

### Signs to look for:

- › Signs of surveillance or monitoring
- › Culture of confession or disclosure
- › Documentation of rules that are excessive or needlessly complex
- › A system of advancement that seems arbitrary or meaningless beyond the group
- › Constant vigilance and self-doubt

## Control of Everyday Activities

**Manipulative groups or individuals** may demand control of everyday activities in a PUI's life, such as sleep, diet, finances, schedule and sex life. They might design and impose **complex rules and systems** that involve punishment and reward to ensure compliance. Some high-control groups or relationships involve arranged marriage or forced sex work. Specialized diets are common in self-help or psychotherapy high-control groups, and starvation or near-starvation diets are typical in cases where a manipulator wants to control the weight or mental state of PUIs. Sleep is often disrupted in many manipulative situations, as the disorientation that comes from fatigue can make a PUI more pliable and susceptible to manipulation. Groups or manipulators may also take control of a PUI's finances, seeking monetary investment or, as is common in the cases of sex trafficking and intimate partner-controlling relationships, complete control over funds.

### Signs to look for:

- › Extreme changes in weight
- › Extreme fatigue or disorientation
- › Loss of financial autonomy
- › Reduced availability for interactions with friends and family due to group or relationship commitments taking precedence

## Contracts/Waivers

Excessive use of contracts and waivers can signify a manipulative environment. Often favoured by corporate or litigious high-control groups like MLMs, complex contracts and waivers generate fear of reprisal and engender compliance. Contracts can also be used to ensure secrecy in the form of NDAs (non-disclosure agreements), which can make PUIs afraid to whistleblow or reveal harmful practices. Contracts can also generate binding promises to comply with complex rules or financially bind someone to a program or marriage. In religious or spiritual high-control groups, contracts can be divine in nature, signifying promises to oneself or a higher power. This is particularly effective for control, as PUIs may perceive these contracts as esoteric, only to have them leveraged for control purposes in cases of non-compliance.

### Signs to look for:

- › Unnecessarily complex and obscure contracts or waivers
- › The use of highly restrictive and unjustified NDAs
- › Use of divine or esoteric contracts

## **Demands for Confession or Full Disclosure**

Confession and full disclosure are common indications of a manipulative environment, as they are effective surveillance and rule compliance methods. Confession or disclosure may be regularly scheduled by a group or manipulator, resulting in a PUI having to disclose and often interrogate their daily activities. This may entail a punishment system for disobedience or failure to comply with established rules. PUIs may also be asked to confess or disclose any thoughts that might be contrary to the rules or teachings of the group or manipulator. Often, manipulators will force PUIs into false confessions. This is achieved by creating an intense confessional environment with long sessions, turning a group against a PUI or repeatedly accusing a PUI to the point where they confess to stop being accused.

Confession acts as a means of control by creating a sense of obligation within PUIs, knowing they must admit wrongdoing and are, therefore, more inclined to adhere to the rules. It can also destabilize a PUI through gaslighting and false confession, which makes them more prone to leaning on the manipulator as a source of forgiveness, saving, or behaviour correction.

Confession leads to a lack of privacy, as PUIs are forced to share everything openly and generate reliance on the group or manipulator for approval of thoughts, interactions and activities. In self-help and psychotherapeutic high-control groups, confession can also be employed as a manipulation tool, requiring PUIs to divulge trauma, secrets, or childhood memories for assessment and intervention within the manipulative program or environment.

### **Signs to look for:**

- › Requirements for sharing personal details or thoughts
- › Scheduled reporting of daily activities
- › A culture or program of extreme disclosure and confession of sins, trauma or secrets



## Escalating Requirements

Early involvement with a manipulative group or relationship often conceals the full extent of its demands, gradually unfolding over time. Typically, these situations initiate with seemingly minor requests, which appear innocuous or as choices made by the PUI. By giving the illusion of control, the PUI may remain enthusiastic about their involvement, making it difficult to discern the coercive nature of these requests. Initial requests might involve actions like limiting contact with a friend or family member, reevaluating fundamental moral values, permitting phone tracking, engaging in sex work once, or introducing others to the group or organization. This tactic resembles the “foot-in-the-door” persuasive technique<sup>1</sup>, where initial compliance with a small request increases the likelihood of compliance with more substantial demands. Subsequently, requirements may intensify incrementally, often with the use of punishment or rewards to encourage continued compliance.

### Signs to look for:

- › Initial requests that impose restrictions, question morals or pose potential dangers
- › Incremental escalation of requirements
- › Established system of punishment and reward within the group or relationship

## Excessive Secrecy

Manipulative groups or individuals often impose extreme levels of secrecy on their members, creating a barrier to sharing information or experiences with outsiders. This culture of secrecy may be enforced through [contracts](#) or non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), with punishments in place for those who breach these rules. Excessive secrecy is a red flag, suggesting hidden agendas or harmful practices that the group or manipulator wishes to conceal. While presenting a positive public image that members are required to uphold, these groups or individuals may engage in different activities and operate by different rules behind closed doors. The enforcement of secrecy is an effective control tactic, as it can induce shame or embarrassment in a PUI while instilling fear of discovery or public exposure. Moreover, manipulators often employ secrecy to create a sense of uniqueness or specialness among members, fostering an “us vs. them” mentality and making PUIs feel

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1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot-in-the-door\\_technique](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot-in-the-door_technique)

privileged to secret, sometimes even sacred, information or a way of life. Secrecy can also be common in intimate partner controlling relationships or trafficking, where a person is made to keep details of their relationship or actions from friends and family. This is often enforced through threats or abuse.

### Signs to look for:

- › Phrases like:

“They will never understand.”

“They’re just not initiated in our ways.”

“You aren’t smart enough to explain adequately. ”

“The tools/technology/lessons aren’t ready to share with the world.”

- › Contracts or NDAs to ensure secrecy
- › Threats of punishment for revealing secrets or sharing personal details

## Exploited or Unpaid Labor

Manipulative groups or relationships often use exploited or unpaid labour as a means of control, income and power. Labour can be exploited in many ways, from unpaid sex work to proselytizing on a street corner. It might look like mandatory volunteer hours on company projects in an MLM or corporate environment. In hate or conspiracy groups, individuals may invest unpaid time in promoting, organizing, or recruiting. Sometimes, it involves tasks like cooking and cleaning to maintain a commune or appease a manipulative partner. Regardless of the context, the manipulator typically benefits the most, whether in monetary or service-based gains. The demand for exploited labour often consumes most, if not all, of a PUI’s time. This can lead to a scarcity of time for non-group or non-relationship activities, potentially resulting in sleep deprivation, confusion, fatigue, and heightened vulnerability.



## Isolation

### Signs to look for:

- › Mandatory unpaid work assignments
- › Significant time commitments to a cause or group
- › Loss of financial control (especially prevalent in sex trafficking)
- › Talk of “owing” something or having to repay gifts or extravagant expenses through labour or favours

One of the primary tactics most manipulative groups and individuals employ is isolation. This isolation can take various forms, with the first being intentional. In this case, the manipulator or group systematically severs the individual’s ties to their social support network. This can be achieved by monopolizing all their time, creating an “us vs. them” mentality by convincing them that their friends and family are malevolent somehow, or by physically isolating them. Physical isolation is particularly prominent in sex trafficking, intimate partner controlling relationships, and certain high-control groups.

The second form of isolation occurs due to the PUI embracing new, often extreme, beliefs or ideologies. These ideologies can lead to alienation from friends and family. This type of isolation is observable in cases such as the QAnon and the anti-vax conspiracy movement. In both forms of isolation, the outcome is strikingly similar. It results in limited exposure to external information, further entrenching the PUI within the manipulative environment or belief system as that becomes their only source of information. Isolation severs PUI’s ties to support systems, fostering psychological and physical dependence on the group or manipulator. Isolation also makes escape challenging because the alienation often means the PUI lacks a supportive environment to return to.

### Signs to look for:

- › Physical relocation to a new residence or city or into a group living arrangement, often paired with the financial inability to leave (particularly prevalent in sex trafficking, intimate partner controlling relationships and specific high-control groups)
- › Extreme ideologies leading to conflicts with loved ones
- › Suggestions that friends and family are misguided, evil, or manipulative

## Lack of Dissent or Questioning

The absence of dissent or questioning in a group or relationship is a significant red flag. Manipulative environments often demand unwavering obedience, suppressing any form of disagreement or critical thinking. Dissent is met with various forms of punishment, including social isolation, verbal abuse, or other consequences. Sometimes, the manipulator may be elevated to divine status, making it taboo to question their decisions or teachings. Independent thought is actively suppressed in manipulative situations, creating an atmosphere where questioning is perceived as disloyalty. Fear of reprisal discourages PUIs from expressing doubt or asking questions. Censorship and dismissal of critics are also common tactics, maintaining a controlled narrative that aligns with the manipulator's agenda.

### Signs to look for:

- › A lack of open discussion in the group or relationship
- › Harsh consequences or punishment for dissent or disagreement
- › Limited exposure to diverse perspectives
- › Lack of ability to question beliefs or actions of the manipulator

## Love-Bombing

Love bombing is a manipulative tactic often used by groups or manipulators to recruit or entice people. This technique involves overwhelming the person with an intense and often insincere display of affection, attention, and affectionate gestures. During the initial stages of a manipulative relationship or group involvement, the person is showered with compliments, gifts, and excessive displays of affection, making them feel adored and valued.

The main goal of love bombing is to create a profound emotional bond and dependency within the PUI, leading them to believe they've found unconditional love and acceptance. Once the emotional connection is firmly established, the manipulator may begin to exert control, isolate the individual from their support network, and implement other coercive and manipulative tactics. Love bombing is particularly prevalent in intimate partner controlling relationships, sex trafficking, and certain high-control groups.

**Note:** The honeymoon stage in any new relationship is real. 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.

### Signs to look for:

- › Excessive flattery and compliments
- › Frequent, extravagant gifts or gestures of love
- › Rapid progression of the relationship, including declarations of love
- › Isolation from friends and family
- › A sudden behaviour change, transitioning from affectionate to critical or demanding once emotional dependency is established
- › Signs of wealth, such as expensive clothes and items, paired with signs of physical abuse (common in sex trafficking and sometimes in intimate partner controlling relationships)

## Monetary Investment

Within manipulative environments, monetary investment can come in many forms and is a potent control tool. Self-help, professional development, psychotherapeutic high-control groups and MLMs typically require financial investment with various classes, courses and workshops at varying intensity levels and buy-in. Oftentimes self-help or psychotherapeutic workshops will invent trauma or mental health issues in order to keep PUIs invested. Religious high-control groups, hate, and conspiracy groups often involve an element of fundraising or donating. Sex trafficking and intimate partner controlling relationships often involve a complete loss of autonomy as the manipulator controls the PUI's finances. Regardless of the means, monetary investment limits a PUI's control over their own financial security and can trigger a version of the sunk cost fallacy<sup>2</sup> in which an individual tends to follow through on commitments or endeavours if they have invested money, time or effort into it, regardless of whether the costs outweigh the benefits at any given time.

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2. <https://thedecisionlab.com/biases/the-sunk-cost-fallacy>

**Signs to look for:**

- › The presence of multiple tiers of financial commitment for classes, courses, or workshops
- › Continuous appeals for donations or fundraising efforts within the group
- › A loss of monetary autonomy or control, where the manipulator oversees all financial matters
- › An atmosphere of scarcity or FoMO where if you don't attend a course, workshop or class, you are not seen as part of the group



## Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is a tactic employed by manipulative individuals or groups to exert control over others. It manifests in various forms, ranging from direct physical harm to less obvious acts of violence, such as threats or intimidation.

In manipulative relationships, particularly in intimate partner controlling relationships and sex trafficking, physical abuse can be a tool to maintain dominance and instill fear. This can include physical assaults, hitting, slapping, or even more subtle acts like blocking access to exits or possessions. Sexual abuse is also prevalent in many coercive and manipulative situations, including sex acts, harassment and forced sex slavery.

Within certain high-control groups, especially religious organizations, physical abuse can also occur as a means of punishment or enforcing compliance. This often takes the form of corporal punishment or rituals that inflict pain. Child abuse is usually common in many religious high-control groups, including physical violence or sexual abuse.

**Signs to look for:**

- › Unexplained physical injuries, bruises, or marks
- › Frequent isolation from friends and family
- › A pervasive atmosphere of fear and intimidation
- › Threats of harm or severe punishment
- › Reports or disclosures of physical harm from the PUI or others

## Punishment

Punishment within a manipulative environment is a powerful mechanism for maintaining control and compliance among those targeted. The methods used for punishment can vary widely, encompassing physical, psychological, and social dimensions.

Physical punishment involves inflicting physical harm or pain as a form of punishment. It can manifest as physical abuse, including hitting, slapping, or other forms of violence. It can also include sexual violence or physical isolation, such as locking a PUI in a room or keeping them tied up. Physical punishment serves to cause immediate harm but also instills fear and encourages submission.

Psychological abuse, like belittling, demeaning language, or consistent put-downs, erodes the self-esteem and self-worth of the person under manipulation. This constant psychological torment creates an atmosphere of fear and anxiety, making the individual more susceptible to control.

In many manipulative groups, social punishment includes shunning, excommunication, or isolation. Those who deviate from the group's rules or beliefs may be ostracized, cut off from their social support network, or threatened with complete exclusion. This fear of losing social connections can be a powerful coercive tool.

PUIs may also internalize the rules and expectations of the manipulative environment, leading them to self-impose punishment or penance when they believe they've disobeyed a rule. This self-policing behaviour reflects the profound psychological impact of the manipulation, as individuals continue to follow the rules even in the absence of external monitoring. This may also make it so a PUI is less likely to identify the signs of abuse or report them, as they will consider it something they are doing themselves or that they deserve.

### Signs to look for:

- › Unexplained physical injuries, bruises, or marks on the individual
- › Frequent use of belittling or derogatory language, either directed toward the person or as part of their self-talk

- › An excessive and intricate set of rules, often designed to be convoluted and difficult to follow
- › Talk of “deserving punishment” or descriptions of self-enforced punishment



## Identity Change

A key strategy that manipulative groups or individuals employ is altering a PUI's identity. This process can be subtle or obvious, but its goal is to mould the person into someone more compliant and subservient to the manipulator's desires.

**Identity change encompasses a wide range of aspects, including:**

### **Name**

A name change can symbolize a fresh start or allegiance to the group's ideology. Often, PUI's are encouraged to adopt a new name that aligns with the manipulator's vision, further distancing them from their former self.

### **Style**

Manipulators may dictate specific clothing styles or appearances that conform to their preferences. This can involve uniform-like attire or other dress codes to create a sense of belonging. It is also typical in instances of sex trafficking for a PUI to change their style to something more overtly sexual.

### **Personality**

PUIs may be coerced into altering their personalities, suppressing traits that the manipulator deems undesirable and amplifying those that serve the group's interests.

### **Likes and Interests**

A person's hobbies, likes, and interests may be disrupted and redirected toward activities supported by the manipulator. This limits the PUI's autonomy over their leisure time and preferences.

### **Values**

Core values and beliefs are often targeted for transformation. Manipulative groups may impose new ideologies, convincing individuals to abandon their previous convictions in favour of the group's doctrine.



### Tattoos and Symbols

Some manipulative environments encourage or require members to get specific tattoos or markings as a sign of commitment or identity. These symbols serve as permanent reminders of their affiliation.

#### Signs to look for:

- › Drastic shifts in behaviour, personality, or appearance
- › Individuals expressing disdain or rejection of their former self
- › The adoption of new names or titles
- › Conformity to specific clothing styles or appearances
- › Rapid abandonment of previous values and beliefs
- › Permanent markings or tattoos associated with the group

## Specialized Language

Manipulative groups and individuals often employ a unique or specialized language as a powerful tool to maintain control over their followers. This linguistic strategy includes adages, phrases, thought-stopping clichés, myths, universal truths, and code words designed to shape the narrative and reinforce the manipulator's authority. This is especially prevalent in high-control groups and conspiracy and hate groups.

Specialized language can foster a sense of belonging and exclusivity among the group members. Using specialized language creates an "us vs. them" mentality, isolating individuals from the outside world and reinforcing their dependency on the group. It can be a potent tool in generating loyalty, implying that only group members truly understand the deeper meaning behind these linguistic cues. Specialized language can also act as a covert form of isolation, as it makes the language difficult for outsiders to understand and can, therefore, alienate a PUI from their social circle outside of the group or relationship.

This specialized language also acts as a form of thought control. Adages, phrases, and clichés are repeated ad nauseam, sometimes in the form of ritualistic chants or songs, effectively suppressing critical thinking and promoting compliance. They often serve as mental shortcuts, discouraging individuals from questioning the manipulator's teachings or the group's doctrines.

Finally, myths, universal truths, and code words function as tools of manipulation and emotional coercion. They can evoke powerful emotional responses and reinforce the manipulator's narrative. Manipulative individuals ensure their followers remain psychologically bound to their authority by framing these linguistic elements as immutable truths or divine revelations.

**Signs to look for:**

- › Pervasive use of unique or specific phrases and adages
- › Language that isolates individuals from their previous social circles
- › Enforcement of linguistic compliance enforced by group inclusion as a reward or exclusion as a punishment

# Manipulative Groups & Relationships





## Conspiracy Groups

Conspiracy groups manifest in diverse forms, ranging from loosely connected online communities to tightly knit organizations with hierarchical structures. These groups propagate intricate yet unsubstantiated theories about hidden agendas, government cover-ups, or world-altering events. They leverage fear, distrust of authorities, and the allure of possessing exclusive “hidden knowledge” to attract followers.

Leadership within conspiracy groups is typically decentralized, with multiple figures vying for recognition in promoting the same theories. These leaders seek social influence and, at times, financial gain, often through online clicks and likes.

PUIs in conspiracy groups often find themselves progressively isolated from their social circles as their fixation on conspiratorial ideas deepens, leading them further “down the rabbit hole.” Some may embrace increasingly dangerous ideas or transition into hate groups or extreme religious ideologies that can incite violence. PUIs in conspiracy groups tend to exhibit extreme skepticism and resistance to evidence contradicting the narratives they embrace. Although group cohesion may not always be strong, these groups, often online-based, employ specialized language and excessive secrecy to entice individuals searching for a sense of purpose or community.

### Prominent Red Flags

- › Escalating requirements
- › Excessive Secrecy
- › Isolation
- › Identity Change (especially ideology)
- › Specialized Language

### Examples of Conspiracy Groups

- › [QAnon](#)
- › [Anti-Vax Movement](#)
- › [Flat-Earthers](#)
- › [Doomsday Preppers](#)
- › [New World Order](#)
- › [Accelerationism](#)

## 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.

Leadership within hate groups is typically hierarchical, with a clear chain of command that may include charismatic leaders who use rhetoric and propaganda to further their ideologies. These leaders often seek to wield power and control over their followers, sometimes to incite violence or promote terror acts.

PUIs involved with hate groups may become deeply entrenched in an echo chamber of hatred, where their worldview is continually reinforced, making it difficult for them to break free from extremist beliefs. This isolation from mainstream society and their friends and family can lead to further radicalization and possible violent extremism.

While hate groups often maintain a strong online presence, they may also hold physical gatherings or rallies to spread hate messages. Hate groups also use specialized language and symbols that serve as coded messages to identify members and supporters. These linguistic and visual markers create a sense of belonging and identity.

### Prominent Red Flags

- › Complex rules systems
- › Escalating requirements
- › Excessive Secrecy
- › Exploited or Unpaid Labour
- › Isolation
- › Identity Change (especially ideology)
- › Specialized Language

## Examples of Hate Groups

- › [Incels](#)
- › [KKK](#)
- › [Atomwaffen Division](#)
- › [Proud Boys](#)
- › [Alt-Right](#)

## Intimate Partner Controlling Relationships (IPCRs)

An Intimate Partner Controlling Relationship (IPCR) typically unfolds within a one-on-one, romantic context, where one partner exerts manipulative control over the other. It's important to note that IPCRs can also manifest in non-romantic, close-friend or familial relationships.

Usually, IPCRs begin and escalate quickly, with the manipulator love-bombing their selected target by showering them with affection, gifts and compliments. From there, manipulators in IPCRs will isolate the PUI from their friends and family, monitor them closely and enact other methods of control, including physical and emotional abuse, punishment, threats of violence to the PUI or their dependents, family or pets, financial control and control of everyday activities. IPCRs can sometimes escalate to life-threatening situations for PUIs, as coercive control is closely linked<sup>3</sup> with intimate partner violence (IPV). IPCRs are also dangerous to leave, as losing control can escalate a manipulator's behaviour and lead to actions such as stalking and physical or sexual violence. Extreme care must be taken when planning an exit from an IPCR.

## Prominent Red Flags

- › Control of Everyday Activities
- › Demands for Confession or Full Disclosure
- › Excessive Secrecy
- › Isolation
- › Love-Bombing
- › Physical Abuse or Threats of Abuse
- › Punishment

## Examples of IPCR

- › [Larry Ray](#) - Sarah Lawrence Cult
- › [Suchite Rivas](#)

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3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6291212/>

## **Multi-Level Marketing Schemes (MLMs), Corporate and Philanthropic High-Control Organizations**

Multi-Level Marketing Schemes (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. These leaders may promise lavish lifestyles and financial success, creating a sense of aspiration and urgency among potential recruits. They may also engage recruits on an ideological or spiritual level by positioning their business or products as self-improvement tools. Other corporate and philanthropic organizations may use similar structural patterns to recruit and retain employees in low-paying, high-workload positions.

Individuals drawn into these organizations can find themselves deeply entrenched in a culture that glorifies the business and isolates them from critical outside perspectives. These organizations often promote community and belonging among members, making it challenging to question the business's legitimacy. Individuals in these organizations may also lose income or status if they exit, especially if it is their only source of financial support or if they have invested in the organization or products.

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 new members 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, success stories, and euphemistic phrases to create a unique identity within the community. In the case of philanthropic organizations, they may also rely on exploited or unpaid labour and require monetary investment or complex rules systems that allow people to move up the ranks or be rewarded for their labour.

### Prominent Red Flags

- › Complex Rules Systems
- › Contracts/Waivers
- › Escalating Requirements
- › Excessive Secrecy
- › Exploited or Unpaid Labour
- › Isolation
- › Monetary Investment
- › Specialized Language

### Examples of MLMs, Corporate and Philanthropic High-Control Organizations

- › [LuLaRoe](#)
- › [Herbalife](#)
- › [ME to WE](#)

## 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. They might also be seen on a larger scale as totalitarian governmental bodies or leaders if they manage to get control of a state or country. However, totalitarianism is a complex political phenomenon with considerations beyond the scope of this document.

Leadership within political high-control groups is often hierarchical, with charismatic figures at the top who encourage a rigid political ideology. These leaders use persuasive techniques, propaganda, and fervent rhetoric to attract and maintain followers, fostering an atmosphere of unwavering loyalty. Individuals involved with political high-control groups may find themselves deeply immersed in an echo chamber that reinforces the group's ideology. This isolation from alternative viewpoints can inhibit critical thinking and deter members from questioning the group's beliefs.

While these groups frequently operate in the digital sphere, they may also hold physical gatherings, rallies, or events to mobilize and further their political agenda. These gatherings



can sometimes escalate into violence depending on the groups involved and what sort of opposition they face.

Political high-control groups often use specialized language, slogans, and symbols that unite members. Some political high-control groups may be smaller in size, allowing for greater control by the leader, including tactics such as identity change, control of everyday activities and monitoring or surveillance.

### Prominent Red Flags

- › Complex Rules Systems
- › Control of Everyday Activities
- › Escalating Requirements
- › Exploited or Unpaid Labour
- › Isolation
- › Monetary Investment
- › Punishment
- › Identity Change
- › Specialized Language

### Examples of Political High-Control Groups

- › [MAGA](#)
- › [Democratic Workers Party \(historical\)](#)

## Professional Development High-Control Groups or Coaching Relationships

Professional Development High-Control Groups are organizations or communities that exert significant control over individuals seeking personal or career growth. They might offer courses, classes or workshops designed to develop a wide variety of skills, including sales and marketing, communications, human resources, sports or 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. These leaders use persuasive techniques, motivational tactics, and elaborate success stories to attract and maintain members. They might also use more intense tactics such as belittling, insulting, and creating intense atmospheres for “development.” They may foster a sense of scarcity and urgency by offering special deals

and packages for their classes or workshops. High-Control coaching relationships are often one-on-one with a personal or professional coach offering success and guidance. The coach will employ similar tactics to those within a high-control group but in a more personalized and focused manner.

PUIs in professional development high-control groups or coaching relationships may find themselves deeply immersed in a carefully constructed narrative that emphasizes the group or coach's methods as the sole path to success within their field. This insular environment shuts down critical thinking and dissent, as PUIs are encouraged to accept the group or coach's teachings or methods without question.

These groups and relationships often involve escalating requirements for involvement that cause isolation for PUIs due to time constraints and constantly increasing financial investments.

### **Prominent Red Flags**

- › Contracts/Waivers
- › Demands for Confession or Full Disclosure
- › Escalating Requirements
- › Excessive Secrecy
- › Exploited or Unpaid Labour
- › Isolation
- › Monetary Investment
- › Punishment
- › Specialized Language

### **Examples of Professional Development High-Control Groups**

- › [Lonsdale Smith & Co](#)
- › [NXIVM](#)

## Self-Help or Psychotherapy High-Control Groups

Self-Help and Psychotherapy High-Control Groups are companies, groups or communities that exert significant influence and control over people 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 people.

Leadership within self-help or psychotherapy high-control groups often involves charismatic therapists, counsellors, healers or self-proclaimed “experts” who promise transformative healing experiences. These leaders may use therapeutic techniques, including individual or group therapy sessions, meditation, workshops, or retreats. Using various methods, they often promise total healing from complex issues or complete self-transformation. Some of these methods may have scientific legitimacy, but the group often misuses them. Alternatively, the practitioner has developed their own unique methods that are typically untested and often extreme. A group or manipulator may also invent trauma or mental illness for an individual in order to keep them invested and to bring them deeper into the process.

These groups frequently employ tactics like forced confession or full disclosure, leveraging PUIs’ traumas or perceived shortcomings to establish an environment of control and dependence. Manipulators position themselves as the sole possessors of the answers, rendering PUI’s reliant on them for healing, validation, or affirmation of personal transformation. Workshops or sessions conducted within these high-control groups are typically lengthy and intense, featuring minimal breaks and an expectation of unwavering commitment in terms of time, financial resources, and emotional energy. This intensity induces fatigue, confusion, hunger, and emotional exhaustion among participants, rendering them more susceptible to further manipulation.

Self-help or psychotherapy high-control groups frequently impose escalating requirements, often entailing substantial financial investments and contributions of time toward group recruitment or volunteer work. These requirements tighten the group’s grip on PUIs while draining them physically, emotionally, and financially.

### Prominent Red Flags

- › Complex Rules Systems
- › Control of Everyday Activities
- › Contracts/Waivers
- › Demands for Confession or Full Disclosure
- › Escalating Requirements
- › Excessive Secrecy
- › Exploited or Unpaid Labour
- › Isolation
- › Monetary Investment
- › Punishment
- › Specialized Language

### Examples of Self-Help or Psychotherapy High-Control Groups

- › [Teal Swan](#)
- › [Landmark Forums](#)
- › [NXIVM](#)
- › [James Arthur Ray](#)
- › [One Taste](#)
- › [Twin Flames](#)
- › [Troubled Teen Industry](#)
- › [Goenka Network](#)

## 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. While many religious and spiritual groups provide meaningful guidance and support, some exhibit manipulative behaviours that can adversely affect their adherents.

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). They wield authority by emphasizing their spiritual knowledge and the promise of salvation or enlightenment. These leaders may use various religious or spiritual practices, rituals, or ceremonies as control tactics.

Members of such high-control groups are frequently subjected to demands for confession or full disclosure of their sins, doubts, or innermost thoughts. This vulnerability is exploited to create an environment of control, dependence, and guilt. Leaders and groups will use complex ideologies or religious narratives to instill rules for correct action that PUIs must adhere to. Convoluted punishment systems will often be devised, encompassing anything from isolation, self-flagellation, physical abuse, shunning, or banishment.

The manipulators within these groups position themselves as the sole intermediaries between their followers and the divine, making PUIs dependent on them for spiritual guidance and salvation. Religious or spiritual ceremonies, rituals, or retreats are often characterized by long durations, minimal rest, and high emotional intensity, physically and emotionally draining followers.

Escalating requirements, including financial contributions or additional commitments like proselytizing or recruiting new members, are commonly employed. Fear of divine retribution or eternal damnation is sometimes used to deter followers from leaving. Physical and sexual violence is prominent in many religious and spiritual high-control groups, and PUIs' daily lives are highly restricted. PUIs often feel a divine sense of purpose that drives them to recruit others or devote themselves completely to the group's belief system, leader or work of the group.

### **Prominent Red Flags**

- › Complex Rules Systems
- › Control of Everyday Activities
- › Contracts/Waivers
- › Demands for Confession or Full Disclosure
- › Escalating Requirements
- › Excessive Secrecy
- › Exploited or Unpaid Labour
- › Isolation
- › Love-Bombing
- › Monetary Investment
- › Physical Abuse
- › Punishment
- › Identity Change
- › Specialized Language

## Examples of Religious and Spiritual High-Control Groups

- › [The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints](#) (FLDS Church)
- › [Scientology](#)
- › [Paramahansa Nithyananda](#)
- › [Love Has Won](#)

## Sex Trafficking

Sex Trafficking involves manipulation, coercion, and exploitation of PUIs 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. Their primary goal is profit, and they use a range of manipulative tactics to maintain control over PUIs.

The initial stages of sex trafficking often involve deception, manipulation, and the grooming of PUIs. Traffickers often pose as friends, lovers or romantic prospects, parental figures, or figures offering opportunities such as modelling recruiters luring PUIs into a false sense of security and love-bomb PUIs with affection and gifts. Isolation is a common early tactic, as traffickers work to cut off PUIs from their social support systems quickly.

Once under their control, traffickers employ various control methods, including physical and sexual violence and substance use/abuse, to ensure compliance. Physical abuse, threats, and the promise of harm to loved ones are leveraged to maintain dominance over the PUIs. PUIs are frequently subjected to extreme secrecy and forced to live in constant fear, making escape seem impossible. Financial control is another common tactic, as traffickers confiscate earnings from sexual exploitation, further trapping PUIs in a cycle of dependency. They may also control everyday activities, dictating everything from what PUIs wear to where they sleep.

## Prominent Red Flags

- › Control of Everyday Activities
- › Demands for Confession or Full Disclosure
- › Escalating Requirements
- › Excessive Secrecy
- › Exploited or Unpaid Labour
- › Isolation

- › Love-Bombing
- › Monetary Investment
- › Physical Abuse
- › Punishment

### Examples of Sex Trafficking Survivors

- › [Gabrielle Giroux](#)
- › [Rebecca Bender](#)

## Systemic Control

While not officially categorized within the scope of these red flags, it's crucial to acknowledge the presence of systemic control, which can manifest in various environments such as prisons, corporate settings, the military, child services, welfare systems, educational institutions, religious institutions and policing. These environments, although diverse, may exhibit signs of psychological manipulation and coercive control.

Although we can work towards individual prevention and recovery, we must recognize that the structure of our modern, disconnected world is an underlying factor that allows manipulators to thrive. If we truly want to help foster resilience and provide a safe world for people to exit into, we must work towards developing more connected, equitable and just communities, systems and institutions. This includes advocating for a fair distribution of wealth and resources, designing robust social support systems, and fostering a sense of community, connection, and purpose for everyone.

By addressing the systemic factors that enable PM and CC and examining the systems that utilize coercive methods, we can work towards a society where manipulation and coercive control have no place.

### Resources For Countering Systemic Control

- › [Hospicing Modernity](#) - Vanessa Machado de Oliveira
- › [Community: The Structure of Belonging](#) - Peter Block
- › [Are Prisons Obsolete?](#) - Angela Y. Davis

- › [Ineligible: Single Mothers Under Welfare Surveillance](#) - Krys Maki
- › [Shifting Carceral Landscapes: Decarceration and the Reconfiguration of White Supremacy](#) - Colleen Hackett and Ben Turk
- › [Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition](#) - Glen Sean Coulthard
- › [The Little Book of Restorative Justice](#) - Howard Zehr
- › [Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples \(RRCAP\)](#)
- › [Foreign Aid: Are we really helping others or just ourselves?](#) - Maliha Chishti
- › [Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging](#) - Sebastian Junger
- › [Abolishing Carceral Society](#) - Abolition Collective