

Toolkit For Helping Your Loved Ones

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



(counter)

Toolkit for Helping Your Loved Ones Under the Influence of Psychological Manipulation and Coercive Control

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Introduction

You are here because you have a loved one who is under the influence of psychological manipulation (PM) and coercive control (CC). These are complicated issues, and it is difficult to identify and grapple with their effects. Seeing a loved one 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 your loved one.

It is important to know that there is no quick fix. Helping a loved one 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. You must also be prepared for the possibility that your loved one may not leave their manipulative situation and that you may have to make some hard choices about your relationship with them.

This toolkit can help you get to a place of deeper understanding with your loved one 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 our website.

A note about emergencies: Sometimes, those 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 for your loved one, please seek professional help immediately. Look for a local hospital with applicable mental health services and take your loved one in. If you know your loved one 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 your loved one is suffering from meditation-related psychosis, please contact [Cheetah House](#) for more information and support.

A large, light purple arrow pointing to the right, with the text "Section Guide" written in bold black font inside it.

Section Guide

PART I - PM AND CC 101

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**What is PM
& CC?**



In order to understand the situation your loved one is in, 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 actions 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 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 your loved one has legal problems due to their involvement with a manipulative group or relationship.

**Identifying
Common Signs of
PM & CC**



If you are unsure that your loved one is involved in a manipulative situation, you might want to keep an eye out for common signs of PM and CC.

Here, we will cover five of the most common signs:

- › **Isolation**
- › **Drastic Personality Shifts**
- › **Extreme Defensiveness**
- › **Emotional Dependence**
- › **Erosion of Boundaries**

For a complete list of red flags and details about various manipulative groups and relationships, please see our [Red Flags List](#).



Isolation

If your loved one is under the influence of PM or CC, they 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 anymore. Their attention might become fixated on their new group or relationship at the expense of all else.

If your loved one 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 (even if that is not true).

Drastic Personality Shifts

Under the influence of PM and CC, your loved one 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 your loved one 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, your loved one 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.

Your loved one's personality shifts may also show in a more physical way, including changes in physical appearance, style or diet and exercise habits. In the case of sex trafficking, this may also include sudden access to things such as high-value clothes, bags, cars or other luxury items.

You might also notice changes in language as your loved one 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 can also create an "us vs. them" mentality, isolating your loved one from the outside world and reinforcing their dependency on the group or manipulator.

If your loved one 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 to save their souls.
- › ...have to act in extreme or violent ways to support their new beliefs.

If your loved one 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, your loved one might 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. Your loved one 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, your loved one might become more dependent, as they might feel they are on the *only* path to more worth, intelligence, truth, goodness, etc.

Extreme Defensiveness

Under the influence of PM and CC, your loved one 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 coercive.

Your loved one 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 will likely be unwilling to question their own thought processes relating to the group, manipulator or new belief system. They will likely be unwilling to explore alternative viewpoints and may respond with resistance or aggression if confronted.

Emotional Dependence

If they are being manipulated, your loved one might over-rely on their manipulator for validation, approval, or a sense of identity. They may struggle to recognize positive qualities within themselves that have not received the manipulator's approval. They may also experience difficulty expressing their genuine emotions.

Tactics used to manipulate your loved one's emotions may include:

- › Guilt or shame being placed on your loved one for expressing or feeling specific emotions
- › Social or physical punishment for negative emotions relating to the group or manipulator
- › Specific direction around what emotions are acceptable
- › Threats of punishment for expressing or feeling 'wrong' emotions

This kind of manipulation can make it hard for your loved one to recognize or express their own emotions and can make them more reliant on the group or manipulator for emotional direction. Your loved one might start to focus completely on the manipulator or group for direction, and you may notice their needs and goals falling away. They might start to find it difficult to express their individuality, make independent decisions or share their own thoughts. You might notice the use of "we" language, where your loved one seems unable or unwilling to refer to themselves in the singular.

Erosion of Boundaries

Under the influence of PM and CC, your loved one will likely experience an erosion of boundaries, sometimes to an extreme extent. They may become unwilling to say no to requests made by the manipulator or group. This erosion of boundaries might be subtle at first but will become more evident over time.

Your loved one may give up some of the following boundaries:



Personal space

Manipulators might demand more and more time with your loved one and take them away from other relationships and activities.



Physical Freedom

Manipulators might demand constant accountability and implement a tracking system to monitor your loved one's whereabouts.



Privacy

Manipulators might demand confession or knowledge of your loved one's innermost thoughts or details about their intimate relationships.



Autonomy

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



Financial Freedom

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



Freedom of Dissent

Fear of retaliation, punishment, or rejection may prevent your loved one from expressing dissenting opinions or questioning the manipulator's demands.

Stages Of Involvement



If your loved one 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 recover. 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*, your loved one 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, your loved one 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 to your loved one.

***Note:** Love-bombing is a common tactic used by high-control groups and manipulative individuals. See more about it in our [Red Flags List](#).

****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 that might occupy your loved one for a time.

Deep Stage

At the Deep Stage, your loved one 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, your loved one might become more and more distanced from their old social circles, friends and 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, your loved one may have made significant commitments to the group or manipulator, potentially involving financial investments or severing ties, making them more reliant and vulnerable to manipulation.



Critical Stage

The Critical Stage is when your loved one will be extremely vulnerable due to prolonged exposure to harmful manipulation tactics. At this stage, your loved one 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, your loved one may question their involvement in the group or relationship or display extreme defensiveness. At this time, your loved one might also 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 our [Recovery Toolkit](#).

SECTION 04

Reasons for Exit 

If your loved one 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. Knowing the main reasons for exit can give you a better understanding of your expectations when trying to form or maintain a connection with a loved one who is being manipulated. Knowing about the reasons for exit can also help you if you want to aid your loved one 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 or shunning. This exit is not chosen and may result from someone being seen as unworthy in some way, perhaps from questioning the group, being rebellious or saying no too often. In 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 person's sense of value and purpose. If forced to exit, the person will also possibly maintain some of the beliefs, values and ideologies of the group or manipulator and will likely require intervention to help them think independently and find identity and meaning beyond the group.



Escape

Escape occurs when a 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.

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

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.

Snapping Out

Snapping out occurs when a person 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 outside information about the group or manipulator that is usually hidden. Maybe a loved one can break through and convince someone that their situation is manipulative or dangerous.

Upon snapping out, it might take a person 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, people 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, people who snap out tend to be 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 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 person 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 people in manipulative situations.

**Understanding
Motivations
& Getting to
Empathy**



To best support your loved one, 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 will also help you connect your loved one with the important resources they might need if they exit their situation.

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

Here, we highlight three key motivations:

- › **Community**
- › **Connection**
- › **Purpose**



Community

Human beings are inherently social. We are biologically wired 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 [epidemic](#). Establishing and nurturing stable communities that fulfill our social needs has become extremely challenging in today's complex world. It is not uncommon for people to turn to high-control, hate, conspiracy, or manipulative groups in search of the sense of community they crave. These groups often create a close-knit environment that promotes a shared commitment to a higher purpose, offering people a place to feel acknowledged and validated. These groups often assume the role of a surrogate family ("chosen family"), extending resources, emotional support, solidarity and a profound sense of inclusion. This appeal of a seemingly supportive community is attractive to a wide range of people, particularly those dealing with feelings of isolation and detachment or those experiencing life changes and seeking support.

Connection

Although we are seemingly always connected by our technology, our society is still profoundly disconnected from things that matter and bring us real fulfillment. As we spend more time on screens and alone in our homes, we move away from connection to each other, the planet and ourselves. Manipulative groups and relationships offer connection on many different fronts. When people get involved in manipulative groups or relationships, they connect to others—romantically, morally, or ideologically—and connect to something greater than themselves. It might be a religious group that encourages spiritual communion with the divine, a conspiracy group that promises access to secret truths and revelations, a multi-level marketing scheme that offers connections to wealth and privilege, or a romantic relationship that promises something deep and intimate. Either way, there is some connection on offer—to something emotional, spiritual, secret, powerful or romantic. This sense of connection can be incredibly appealing to many people, especially those feeling lonely, disconnected, powerless or disenfranchised.

Purpose

People want to be useful. They want to help and make a difference. They want to change the world and do something amazing with their lives. But it is often hard to know what and how to do it. The world is becoming ever more complex, and it takes a lot of knowledge and understanding to make an impact. This desire for direction leaves us open to influence. Manipulative groups and individuals often promise a sense of purpose, either explicitly or implicitly. High-control groups of all kinds, hate and conspiracy groups, often have a particular mission or set of values to spread that they believe will change the world for the better or, at the very least, change your life. Manipulative and abusive relationships and sex traffickers offer the purpose of caring for someone deeply and romantically. This aligns with the deep sense of purpose we are often told we should get from our romantic connections. The sense of purpose on offer in many manipulative groups and relationships is alluring, and these groups or relationships often offer easy answers to complex questions, making the connection to purpose much more accessible.



Getting to Empathy

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

See our [Empathy Questionnaire](#) to take a deeper dive into your loved one's motivations. Also explore key questions related to 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 your loved one.



Developing a Realistic Plan

When connecting with someone 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 they might not be able to exit. So, the first goal should always be building trust and connection to give them a safe space to land if they do exit.

With each step you take in this process, it is essential to remember what is at stake for your loved one. 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 may ultimately allow them to feel safe enough to exit with their dignity intact and autonomy restored.

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 in your relationship with your loved one and what you hope to get out of the process of connecting or reconnecting with them. When creating goals, it is important to keep them realistic.

An example of an unrealistic goal might be: "I want my relationship with my loved one to look like it did in the past." This is unrealistic because it does not consider the changes in your loved one, yourself or your relationship. Part of undertaking this process means accepting that things have changed and working with the relationship as it is now. That can be difficult to accept, but it is pivotal to building trust with your loved one.

A more realistic goal might be: "I want to develop a connection with my loved one that involves them trusting me enough to share their feelings with me." This goal is realistic because it does not rely on a past relationship and 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 my loved one and their motivations for their involvement with the group or relationship.
- › I want to have a positive conversation with my loved one to remind them why I care for them.
- › I want to build trust with my loved one to create a safe place for them to land if they choose to exit.
- › I want to get to the point where I can ask my loved one questions about their life without triggering defensiveness.
- › I want to help my loved one exit their group or relationship on their own terms, in their own time.
- › I want to do an activity with my loved one (bowling, a picnic, a walk, etc.) without conflict.
- › I want to allow my loved one to question me without getting defensive. **Note:** This can model open communication and welcome an environment where questioning is encouraged and celebrated.



Boundaries and Self-Care

Trying to connect with someone 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 in. Because of this, it is vital to create firm boundaries and practice good self-care while still trying to help or connect.

Boundaries

Once you have created goals for communication with your loved one, 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 your loved one. Your boundaries shouldn't put unreasonable demands or expectations on your loved one.

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

- › What do I need in order to feel safe in my relationship?
- › What do I need in order to keep supporting my loved one?
- › How do my boundaries affect my loved one?
- › Are my boundaries fair and reasonable?

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

PRACTICAL BOUNDARIES

Living Arrangement

If you live with your loved one, you must consider what daily life looks like and what you need to be happy, safe and comfortable in your household.

Financial Limitations

If your loved one 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. Even if you think it will bring you closer to your loved one, be mindful not to fund any purchases that might support their manipulative situation.

Children and Dependents

If you and your loved one are jointly responsible for the well-being of others, those dependents must be financially, physically and emotionally protected.

Personal Safety

You must ensure that you are safe from the influence of the manipulator your loved one 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.

Technology Use

Consider monitoring and limiting electronic communication with your loved one. 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 your loved one's situation, as you don't know who might be connected to the manipulator.

Level of Sacrifice

Set boundaries around how much you are willing to give up to connect with or help your loved one. Know that whatever limit you choose is okay, and helping your loved one should never be at the expense of your own well-being.

EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES

Abusive Behaviour

If your loved one is being belittled, gaslit or otherwise emotionally abused, it is not uncommon for them to do the same to their loved ones. 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 your loved one. 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 your loved one 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.

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 your loved one might feel upset. You might 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 the [resources](#) section on our website for police alternatives.

If your loved one becomes aggressive, do not engage.

Make sure everyone is coming into the situation 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 your loved one is in a high-control situation, they may be subject to many rules and limitations that they could be punished for breaking. Try to make sure that you are firm but not harsh about your boundaries, and avoid blaming your loved one 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 our website.



Self-Care

Caring for yourself as you try to connect with your loved one 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 your loved one will take time or might not happen at all. You must also accept that your relationship with your loved one has changed. Depending on their [stage of involvement](#), you may have lost your loved one 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 complex relationship dynamics. If they are not PM and CC trained, direct them to our 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 loved one 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 cannot help anyone unless you help yourself first. It would be helpful 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.

MAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF

Remember to set time aside for self-care and activities that bring you joy and do not involve your loved one 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 your loved one.

FEEL YOUR FEELINGS

Sometimes, the situation with your loved one 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. Even if you cannot share those feelings with your loved one, do not repress them, as they are valid and necessary. If needed, reach out to your support network or a therapist for validation and support to help you explore the feelings that arise.

GIVE YOURSELF CREDIT

Connecting with a loved one 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 leave. As hard as that might be, it is important to remember that option. If you are in a violent or dangerous situation with your loved one, or if your mental or physical health (or someone else's) is at risk, it might be time to step away from the situation for a while. 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 your loved one.

Note: Sometimes, walking away or taking space is not an option, for example, if your loved one is dependent on you. 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 someone 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 and that you will never get back the person you once knew and loved.

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

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 your loved one. Your life has changed. Your loved one has changed. You have lost someone, and it will never be quite the same. But it doesn't have to be the end of the story. We can still find value in loss and change, and this could be an opportunity for you to find a deeper understanding and a more profound (though different) connection with your loved one.

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 your loved one 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 towards 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 your loved one to leave their manipulative situation**. You are only trying to establish trust and provide a safe, non-judgmental place for your loved one to connect with you.

Things to consider during your moments of connection with your loved one:

- › **Work towards understanding.** Use our [empathy questionnaire](#) to find help getting a deeper understanding of your loved one 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 a point your loved one is making, 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, 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 your loved one retreats in anger or fear.

Note: Sometimes, your loved one might have cut you off completely. 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 your loved one 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 judgment. The goal is to communicate to your loved one 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 your loved one 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 your loved one 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 your loved one 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. 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 your loved one is not open to it at the time, it won't go anywhere.

Some questions/explorations in this step might be:

- › How can we be around each other in ways that make us both feel comfortable?
- › What can we agree on in our lives together that we value and want to develop?
- › 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. 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.
- › ...offer and take breaks if the conversation gets difficult.
- › ...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 your loved one. If you can develop a trusting and stable connection, it might 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 your loved one'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 your loved one and then follow through. It could be a weekly text check-in, a biweekly visit or a daily two-minute conversation about the weather.

Consistency in the nature of your interactions is also vital. If your loved one 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 your connection with your loved one. If you are working to build a connection with your child, your spouse, or anyone else you have some control with, 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.

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 your loved one's motivations and feelings.

Modelling

Modelling open and loving relationships can go a long way to helping your loved one 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 in a graceful manner is important to help your loved one see that mistakes are natural and normal.

- › **Encourage Questioning:** Be open and honest when your loved one asks a question*. Manipulators often keep secrets and hoard knowledge and often discourage questioning through punishment or threats. By modelling openness, you can help your loved one see that honesty is part of a good relationship.
- › **Show Gratitude:** If your loved one 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 may want to start gently trying to help your loved one question their involvement with the manipulative group or relationship. This process is slow and challenging, though. It would be best to get external help with this. A family or individual therapist trained in PM and CC can help your loved one get to the root of their involvement with the group or relationship and explore their feelings in a more objective setting.

For more information on this process, see our [Toolkit for Identifying and Countering PM and CC](#).

SECTION 09

Recovery



If your loved one were to exit their manipulative situation, there is much to be considered around recovery. The first consideration must be practical. Your loved one must have basic needs met, like food, shelter, and supportive connections. They might need help gaining financial independence, accessing medical care or addiction services, finding employment and creating robust support networks. Once they are settled and have begun the practical work of rebuilding their lives, it will then be possible to tackle the mental and emotional work necessary for recovery. Your loved one might be suffering from their traumatic experience with the group or manipulator. They may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, or PTSD. They may also have lingering feelings of guilt or shame. Recovery from PM and CC is complex and should be aided by a PM and CC-trained therapist. Please find resources for recovery in the resources section on our website, and see our [toolkit for recovery](#) for more information.

One of the most important considerations for recovery and prevention is helping your loved one develop community, connection and purpose. If you feel confident in your ability to help them with this, here are some suggestions to guide you.

Note: Ensure that any group or hobby your loved one takes up is safe and non-manipulative. See our [red flags list](#) for more details.

Community

- › Help your loved one find safe social events, clubs, sports or hobby groups that align with their interests. This might require exploring new interests or re-engaging with old ones that the group or manipulator repressed.
- › Encourage volunteering for local organizations, community initiatives or local advocacy groups. Your loved one might be interested in getting involved with groups or initiatives that help others who have been through similar experiences.
- › Share information about local support groups that align with your loved one's challenges. Again, be sure that the group is vetted.
- › Recommend community centers, libraries, or cultural centers where your loved one can take workshops and classes and participate in activities that generate healthy community connections.
- › Help your loved one find healthy and safe religious or spiritual organizations that offer a sense of community and shared values.
- › Connect your loved one with mentorship programs that can provide guidance and support.
- › Suggest your loved one organize neighbourhood gatherings, potlucks, or community events.
- › If your loved one is in school, help them identify school groups and other supports that will help them connect with other students and staff.

Connection

- › Help your loved one find ways to overcome financial insecurity through government programs or assistance and planning steps to find stable employment if possible.
- › Encourage your loved one to reconnect with nature by exploring nearby parks and natural spaces.
- › Help your loved one 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 your loved one find reliable and unbiased sources of information and news.
- › Encourage your loved one to maintain strong and weak ties as well. Weak ties can be an important source of connection and meaningful interaction.

Purpose

- › Encourage your loved one 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 have never experienced.
- › Help your loved one define and set short-term and long-term goals and identify pathways to achieve them.
- › Help your loved one find a mentor or guide in a field of interest.
- › Help your loved one identify their core values. Exploring values can serve as a foundation for finding purpose.
- › Encourage your loved one to connect with others with diverse perspectives and purposes to understand the breadth of possibility.
- › Explore the possibility of education to enhance or gain new skills. Help your loved one find educational funding through grants or scholarships.
- › Explore means of purpose through avenues beyond employment, including community engagement, connection to nature, or volunteering.
- › Encourage your loved one to explore without the pressure of immediately finding a specific purpose. Purpose often emerges gradually through experimentation; therefore, it should not be forced.

NOTE FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

If your loved one is your child, care will be needed. Encouraging them to try new things is important, but it is equally important to provide variety and make sure they are happy with the activities they are involved with. Really listen to your child and don't force them to do something they are unhappy with. When we are young, our interests can change rapidly, and that's okay. Getting out of their comfort zone and away from their devices is vital, but they must want to explore the new activities in a genuine way or it won't be authentic to them and might trigger anger, anxiety or defensiveness. Try to make the search for activities collaborative, informed and consent-based. Make sure they have a say in what they are doing and try to be flexible about your expectations or restrictions. Autonomy, communication and trust are key in this process.

For more information please see our [ToolKit for Helping Youth](#).