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Understanding Domestic Violence – Why it is difficult to leave an abusive relationship

28 August 2025 7 min read

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Introduction

People in abusive relationships are often asked: *“Why don’t you just leave?”*. While this base question is simple, the answer is decidedly complicated. Understanding the complexities involved requires an interrogation of the underlying relational dynamics.

Several models and theories have been formulated to analyse the base question. This article considers two such models, before examining judicial insights into a theory that may clarify this enquiry.

Cycle of Abuse

The “[Cycle of Abuse](#)” model describes a cyclical pattern of abusive behaviours, typically recurring in four phases: “tension-building”; “incident”; “reconciliation”; and “calm”.

In the *tension-building* phase, the abuser creates a tense and stressful environment, causing the survivor to fear an imminent domestic violence incident. Consequently, the survivor adapts their own behaviour toward the abuser – usually by appeasing them – to prevent an abusive incident.

In the *incident* phase, the abuser commits domestic violence to dominate and exert power over the survivor. This may take the form of physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, verbal, or other types of abuse.

In the *reconciliation* phase, the abuser either: apologises for the incident; makes excuses to avoid responsibility for it; blames it on the survivor; or gaslights the survivor into believing that the incident was not as bad as the survivor claims (or that it did not occur in the manner that the survivor remembers it, or at all). The abuser may appear or pretend to be remorseful or saddened by their conduct, often showing the survivor excessive affection or buying gifts to make up for the incident. Sometimes abusers resort to manipulating the survivor by threatening to commit self-harm or suicide.

In the *calm* phase (sometimes called the *honeymoon* phase), the parties have reconciled, and the relationship is calm. However, as this phase progresses, the abuser’s remorse, apologies, and promises, become disingenuous or disappear altogether, recreating tensions that revert the cycle back to the first phase.

This model highlights that abusive incidents are interspersed with phases of relative normalcy during which the survivor believes the relationship can work out or improve, usually because of the abuser’s manipulative machinations.

Power and Control Wheel

Another model is the “[Power and Control Wheel](#)”. As the name suggests, an abuser seeks to establish, maintain and exert power and control over the survivor. The Wheel has two bands delineating how the abuser achieves this.

The *inner band* lists eight abusive tactics commonly used by abusers, on an ongoing basis. These are: using coercion and threats; using intimidation; using emotional abuse; using isolation; minimising, denying and blaming; using children; using male privilege; and using economic abuse. Importantly, not all of these tactics must be present to constitute abusive behaviour.

The *outer band* lists two additional tactics: physical and sexual violence. Abusers use these tactics (or the threat thereof) to reinforce the efficacy of the other tactics, ensuring that the survivor becomes so fearful of potential physical or sexual violence – which does not necessarily have to be directed at the survivor – that they submit to the abuser’s power and control.

This model illustrates that abuse is often systematic, strategic and ongoing. Using any one or a combination of the listed tactics, the abuser induces fear in the survivor, creates dependency, and isolates the survivor, in order to dominate and control them.

Coercive Control Theory

In addition to the above models, “coercive control theory” provides further context for addressing the base question.

Domestically, coercive control in domestic relationships was initially recognised in ***S v Engelbrecht*** [2005] JOL 13771 (W). The court defined domestic violence as “*a pattern of coercive control characterized by the use of physical, sexual and psychological abusive behaviour*” and noted that “*understanding domestic violence as coercive control points to the instrumentality of such abuse*”. The court acknowledged that coercive control theory establishes that abusers aim to exert power over their partner and control their life by isolating them from outside support and “*reinforcing the futility of the victim’s efforts to leave or protect herself*”. Additionally, the court observed that: “*To understand the psychological impact of domestic violence, it is important to look at the pattern of overall coercive control present in the relationship, rather than specific instances of such*

control” and that coercive control “does not require physical violence, only that the victim perceives that there is no means to escape as a result of the abuser’s behaviour”.

These perspectives in **Engelbrecht** directly address the complexity of why it is difficult to leave abusive relationships.

Subsequently, coercive control was formally recognised when the [Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998](#) was [amended in 2023](#) by introducing the following definitions:

“coercive behaviour” means to compel or force a complainant to abstain from doing anything that they have a lawful right to do, or to do anything that they have a lawful right to abstain from doing; and

“controlling behaviour” means behaviour towards a complainant that has the effect of making the complainant dependent on, or subservient to, the respondent and includes —

(a) isolating them from sources of support;

(b) exploiting their resources or capacities for personal gain;

(c) depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance or escape; or

(d) regulating their everyday behaviour”.

Indicators of Coercive Control

Given their relative novelty, there is currently no domestic case law involving a judicial analysis of these definitions. However, based on the jurisprudence of foreign courts, the following elemental indicators of coercive and controlling behaviours may be distilled:

“(a) There is (or was) a domestic relationship between the perpetrator and victim;

(b) The behaviour may involve both physical and/or non-physical conduct;

(c) The behaviour constitutes forceful compulsion;

(d) The behaviour is patterned, repetitive and/or continual;

(e) The behaviour is unreasonable, wrongful and/or unlawful; and

(f) The effect or impact of the behaviour on the victim is deleterious in that:

- it erodes or undermines the will or volition of the victim;*
- it detrimentally affects the victim’s self-esteem, self-worth, self-image, self-identity, self-determination, dignity, autonomy and/or sense of individuality;*
- it causes the victim psychological and/or emotional distress; and/or*
- it has an adverse effect on the victim’s day-to-day activities.”*(Dakalo Singo “[Coercive and Controlling Behaviour in the Domestic Violence Act](#)” *South African Law Journal* 140, No. 4, page 783).

These indicators are subject to the following caveats. First, the indicators serve as guidelines and are therefore not prescriptive. Secondly, “it is not an individual act that is determinative, but rather the overall impression discernible from a collective range of acts” (Singo, page 783). Thirdly, “the absence of any one or more of the above indicators in a specific evidential scenario before the courts will not necessarily mean that the behaviour under scrutiny is not contemptible coercive control” (Singo, page 783).

Conclusion

In some countries (e.g. England and Wales), coercive control is viewed in such a serious light that it has been criminalised, with other countries (e.g. Canada and Australia) considering whether to follow suit. While cases involving coercive control are

underreported, there is a gradual increase in reported cases. A 2024 report (in England and Wales) records that [45,310 coercive control offences were reported](#) to the police in that reporting year, with [43,774](#) and [41,039 cases reported](#) in the two preceding years. This increase is attributed to the police's improving ability to recognise cases of coercive control.

It is therefore important to understand what constitutes coercive and controlling behaviours as these are fundamental aspects of domestic violence underpinning other types of abusive conduct and occurring continually over a protracted period. The fact that there is currently no domestic case law on coercive and controlling behaviour concretises the need for awareness about coercive control and its role in domestic violence.

By becoming familiar with the above indicators, not only will people recognise the signs of coercive control and address them, but they will also begin to understand the answer to the base question.



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