

Signs of an Abusive Relationship

PSYCHOEDUCATION · FEAR, CONTROL AND HARM IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

What abuse can look and feel like, including when it is hard to name

Abuse is a pattern of behaviour used to frighten, control or harm someone close. It is not always physical, and it can happen in any relationship, whatever someone's gender, sexuality, age or background. If these signs feel familiar, what is happening is not your fault.

01 Nine signs to notice

fear and control, not ordinary conflict

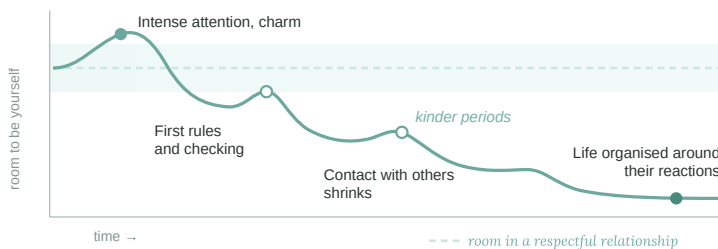
FEAR <i>Walking on eggshells</i>	⚠ Living in fear You feel afraid of their reactions and change what you say or do to avoid their anger. <i>e.g. Rehearsing how to mention something small.</i>	⚡ Threats and intimidation Threats to hurt you, themselves, children, pets or belongings; smashing things, blocking exits or frightening driving. <i>e.g. Punching a wall close to you in an argument.</i>	💔 Physical or sexual harm Pushing, hitting, choking or strangling, or pressure or force around sex. Choking or strangling is a serious sign of danger. <i>e.g. Being held down so you can't leave the room.</i>
CONTROL <i>Losing your freedom</i>	👁 Monitoring and isolation Checking your phone, messages or location, and limiting contact with friends, family or work. <i>e.g. Being expected to share your location at all times.</i>	💰 Economic control Controlling or withholding money, running up debt in your name, or stopping you from working. <i>e.g. Needing permission to buy everyday things.</i>	📋 Rules and punishment Unspoken rules about what you wear, where you go or who you see, with rage or days of silence if they are broken. <i>e.g. Being ignored for days after seeing a friend.</i>
UNDERMINING <i>Doubting yourself</i>	⬇ Degradation Repeated humiliation, name-calling or put-downs, in private or in front of others, often passed off as a joke. <i>e.g. "Can't you take a joke?" after being mocked.</i>	🕒 Distorting reality Your memories or perceptions are denied or twisted until you doubt your own judgement, sometimes called gaslighting. <i>e.g. "That never happened. You're imagining it."</i>	🔄 Blame and remorse You are blamed for their behaviour, and harm may be followed by apologies, gifts or promises before it happens again. <i>e.g. "Look what you made me do."</i>

On the evidence: abuse can happen to anyone; globally, women are most often affected by intimate partner violence. Coercive control describes an ongoing pattern rather than single incidents, and signs can look different across cultures and relationships.

02 Abuse is about control, not conflict

a clinical way of thinking, not a measured law

Abuse is not a communication problem. In conflict, both people can disagree and still feel safe. In abuse, one person uses fear, control or harm to get their way. It often starts subtly and narrows a life over time, and kinder periods in between can make the pattern harder to see.



i	Notice	Trust what you've noticed, even without a label.
ii	Know	It is not your fault, and not yours to fix alone.
iii	Connect	Reach out to someone you trust, when it's safe.
iv	Plan	Specialist services can help with safety planning.
v	Pace	Plan changes with support; leaving can raise risk.

03 Reflecting on one relationship

optional · only if it feels safe to write things down

Signs from section 01 I recognise:

Someone I could safely talk to:

Something that would help me feel safer:

It is not your fault

No one deserves to be frightened, controlled or hurt. Abuse is a choice made by the person using it, not a reaction to anything you did or didn't do.

Couples counselling is generally not recommended where there is abuse; individual, specialist support is safer.

YOUR SAFETY COMES FIRST

If someone may check your phone, browser or belongings, think about where you keep this page, or read it without writing anything down. You can stop at any point.

If you are in immediate danger, contact your local emergency services. Specialist domestic and family violence services can help you think through your options, including safety planning.

SOURCES

Campbell, J. C., Webster, D., Koziol-McLain, J., Block, C., Campbell, D., Curry, M. A., ... Laughon, K. (2003). Risk factors for femicide in abusive relationships: Results from a multisite case control study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(7), 1089–1097. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.93.7.1089>

Glass, N., Laughon, K., Campbell, J., Block, C. R., Hanson, G., Sharps, P. W., & Taliaferro, E. (2008). Non-fatal strangulation is an important risk factor for homicide of women. *Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 35(3), 329–335. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jemermed.2007.02.065>

Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive control: How men entrap women in personal life*. Oxford University Press.

Sweet, P. L. (2019). The sociology of gaslighting. *American Sociological Review*, 84(5), 851–875. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419874843>

World Health Organization. (2026, June 18). *Violence against women* [Fact sheet]. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>