

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS IMATTERS

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Control Issues – Who's Got the Power?

How To Stand Up For Yourself When Someone Tries to Control You

One source of confusion and conflict between people is when one person tries to control another, using subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle methods. When they are in the presence of the controlling person, the one being controlled feels lost, devalued, and disconnected from their own decision-making processes. This situation may become so uncomfortable that the person being controlled may rebel against the controller. This individual may even decide to abandon the relationship altogether – which prompts the controller to use ever more oppressive control techniques. When this happens, the controller responds to a feeling of rejection. The controller uses control techniques, in fact, to avoid feeling abandoned. They just want to be close, and they usually have no idea that their behavior is perceived as controlling.

Control between people is healthy to an extent. Structure helps to prevent chaos and provides clear expectations regarding what kinds of behavior are acceptable in any interaction. In this sense, we all use some degree of control when we deal with other people. We might, for instance, make it clear to others where our personal boundaries lie (that is, how far can you go with me and what is unacceptable to me). Our personal boundaries are usually conveyed nonverbally. People can pick up – based on our cues and responses to situations – on what we do to maintain our own sense of self. When this information



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In his private practice, Dr. Duncan specializes in:

- **Depression**
- **Anxiety**
- **Grief and Loss**
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fails to be conveyed nonverbally, we may even have to speak up and state it clearly with words. This level of control can be defined as healthy. It allows for good, clear interactions between people.

There is a certain point, however, where control crosses the line from healthy to destructive. We often don't know when that line has been crossed. Consider the following examples –

- “I hate to mow the lawn.” “No, you don't. Just look at how much time you spend outdoors and how nice the lawn looks when it has been cut.”
- “I'm thinking about quitting my job.” “I can never trust you.”
- “Could you wear something a little less revealing? I don't want men at the party looking at you.”
- “No, you can't go play golf. You need to spend your weekends with me. I'll have nothing to do.”

**“Who are you going to believe?
Me, or your own lying eyes?”**

– *Groucho Marx*, and later, *Richard Pryor*

THE PERSON WHO CONTROLS

Anyone can be perceived as controlling, and most of the time they don't have a clue that they are at all controlling. Paradoxically, they feel that it's the person being controlled who has more power in the relationship. After all, the controlled person simply has to refuse to go along with the control attempts, and the controller is left feeling rejected and abandoned. And it's this fear of being rejected or abandoned that prompts the controller to use his or her control techniques in the first place.

Let's look at how it all starts. To provide a comparison, let's consider children who are brought up in healthy and validating households. With guidance, these children are encouraged to make their own decisions. They are encouraged to test reality and develop strategies for dealing with situations as they come up. Over time, they acquire a good sense of confidence in their own abilities to deal with life's challenges. They are connected with their own internal processes and they use their strengths to deal directly with solving life's problems.

In contrast, many children grow up with parents who fail to provide the validating environment described above. The parents insist that things be done their way, and the child, it is assumed, simply has to follow directions in order to grow up in the way the parent has in mind. “Mother (or Father) knows best.” “Children are to be seen and not heard.” The problem with this approach is that these children have little opportunity to try things out for themselves, learn to solve problems, or gain confidence in their ability to deal effectively with the world. They perform according to their parents' expectations and end up disconnected from their own sense of efficacy. They develop the idea that as long as people go along with what is expected of them, then things will feel secure. Then they carry this strategy into an adulthood in which people are rewarded for complying with each other's wishes.

When stress occurs, the controlling person goes into crisis mode, thinking, “If only everyone does what they're supposed to, and I'll be the one who decides what we should do, then we'll all get through this.” The controlling person does not feel secure within when other people make their own decisions. Anyone with a dissenting opinion is seen as a threat. Dissent leads the controller to feel vulnerable and abandoned – and this leads to even greater attempts to impose control over others in a rigid and inflexible manner.

Most controllers function fairly well in the world, and might never be seen by casual acquaintances as having control issues. They may have good social skills and appear to be independent people who make good decisions in life. Controlling behavior becomes a problem with family members, close friends, and partners. Controllers assume that they know the inner reality of people they are especially close to – although they haven't asked about, and don't want to be bothered with, the true inner feelings of these people. They assume that if they truly love someone, that person will conform to what they need. Dissenting opinions mean that the other person doesn't love you – a lesson learned early in the families the controllers grew up in.

**It is the fear of being rejected
or abandoned that triggers
controlling behavior.**

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METHODS OF CONTROL

Controlling behavior comes in many forms – and it may be difficult to recognize because it comes to seem normal.

Defining the Other Person – The person who controls comes up with ways to describe the other person which, over time, become the reality of the relationship. “You’re just trying to get attention again.” “It’s always about you, isn’t it?”

Diminishing – The controller diminishes the other person’s authentic self so that he or she can justify stepping in and taking control. “You can’t do anything right.” “You’re a loser.”

Isolating – The controlling person loses his or her grip when the other person has other social contacts that serve as sources of validation. “No, I don’t want you spending so much time with the people at work.” “That friend you always talk to is a hateful busybody.”

Verbal Abuse – There are many examples of verbal abuse – withholding praise, name-calling, blaming, accusing, judging, criticizing, trivializing, threatening, commanding. “You are not who you think you are. I tell you who you are because you can’t think for yourself.”

Stalking and Physical Abuse – Control behavior can escalate to the point of danger. This situation calls for immediate action. Get help. Talk to a professional. Get out of danger.

THE CONTROLLED PERSON

Controllers would not be able to operate without the cooperation of the person who is controlled. We may be drawn into a controlling relationship for any number of reasons, one of which may have to do with our self-esteem. If we feel that others are better than we are, we might involve ourselves in a relationship in which we are told what to do. Or perhaps we ourselves have grown up in a family in which there was a large amount of control – so involving ourselves in a controlling relationship in adulthood might seem to be the natural thing to do. Birth order sometimes has an influence on the amount of control a person exhibits in adulthood. The two oldest children in a family often use control over each other, resulting in fierce arguments, while an oldest child and a middle-born child might display harmony.

People under the influence of a controlling person develop a set of illusions about life. For example,

- that it is reasonable for one person to define another
- that they do not have the right to their own opinions
- that they can earn respect and closeness by acceding to another’s wishes
- that they need permission to act in matters which are their own business.

Eventually, however, the controlled person feels uncomfortable. We want to trust and help other people, but when that trust is exploited by a controlling person, conflict arises. We feel that our inner reality, our rights, and our boundaries are being violated. If we go along with the control, we feel disconnected from our own ability to make decisions. When our own intuition tells us that one course of action should be taken, and we are told something entirely different – by a person who feels that they know us better than we know ourselves – we feel discounted.

THE SOLUTION

Most controlling people are shocked to learn that someone else feels that they are being controlling. They are simply trying to get close to the other person – and how to get close is to share your thoughts about how to do things. They are unable to have true empathy for the person who is under their control. When the controlled person resists their attempts to exert control, they feel lost and abandoned.

The controlled person eventually finds the situation to be intolerable. This can lead to conflict and even the eventual ending of the relationship. What the controlled person might want to examine, before the conflict sets in, is why they were able to enter into a controlling relationship in the first place.

A professional therapist is able, in a confidential setting, to explore the reasons you find yourself in a controlling relationship and to suggest ways to deal with the situation in ways that bring the conflict to a positive resolution. With greater understanding about why the controlling situation occurred in the first place, you may never have to enter into this kind of relationship again.

BOOK RECOMMENDATION

Evans, Patricia. *Controlling People*. Paperback, 2002, 300 pages, \$12.95, ISBN: 1-58062-569-X.

Some Tips on Dealing with Controlling People

- When you are in a controlling relationship, it is difficult to *stay in touch with your authentic self* – that part of yourself that draws on all of your own strengths in order to deal with life’s situations. When someone controls you, you lose track of who you are. But getting back to your true self is precisely what you need to do. Spend some time thinking about how you would do things if it were left up to you alone to make the decisions.
- **Work on your self-esteem.** Start thinking about the things you like about yourself. Repeat these to yourself several times a day. When you find you are having negative thoughts about yourself, pay attention and exchange the negative thoughts for positive ones. Start spending time with people who like you and enhance you – and take in the positive feedback you get from these people. Take good care of your appearance by wearing nice clothes, styling your hair in a way that brings out the best in you, and smiling around other people.
- It is helpful to understand that directly confronting the controlling person might do no good at all. The controller, after all, doesn’t recognize your authenticity and may come back with even stronger control attempts. A more effective method might be to simply *assert yourself* and tell the controlling person that you feel uncomfortable with the amount of control you are dealing with. Use “I-statements,” taking responsibility for your own feelings, rather than placing blame on the controlling person. Tell the controller that you don’t feel comfortable with your interactions and that in the future you will expect treatment that recognizes equality in the relationship.
- Patricia Evans, in her book, *Controlling People*, suggests *using the word, “What?”* When the controller makes an attempt to control you, simply come back with “What?” This alleviates you of having to explain yourself and getting into a confrontation that you might well lose. It breaks the control spell between you and you can’t be accused of interrupting – you are simply asking for clarification. Using the word “What?” reminds the controller of what is going on and might make the person think, “What did I just say?”
- Finally, *consult with a professional therapist.* This provides a safe, confidential, and trusting setting where you can talk about your feelings about being controlled. You can come to understand how you got into this type of relationship and what you can do to avoid it in the future.



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