



SAFEGUARDING, DISCLOSURE & PERSONAL SAFETY

The Power and Control Wheel

Recognising patterns of power, control and abuse
within relationships.

The key idea

The Power and Control Wheel is an educational model for recognising how different abusive behaviours can work together to create a wider pattern of control. It can help make patterns visible when individual incidents seem disconnected.

What is the Power and Control Wheel?

The **Power and Control Wheel** was developed through the Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs in Duluth, Minnesota. It is an educational framework showing how a range of behaviours can be used to establish or maintain power and control within an abusive intimate relationship.

Look for the pattern

A single behaviour can sometimes have more than one explanation. The Wheel is most useful when it helps someone notice a **repeated pattern**: fear, restriction, intimidation, dependency or loss of freedom created through multiple behaviours over time.

Why is it a wheel?

In the original model, **power and control** sit at the centre. Different forms of non-physical abuse appear around the wheel, while physical and sexual violence form the outer rim. The design illustrates that physical violence may reinforce a wider system of control, but abuse can also be serious when physical violence is absent.

A framework, not a diagnostic test

The Wheel can support reflection and conversation, but it cannot determine by itself whether a relationship is abusive. Context, pattern, impact, fear, coercion and the person's own experience all matter.

An important limitation

The original Duluth Wheel was developed from work with women experiencing abuse from male partners. Domestic abuse can affect people of any sex, gender identity or sexual orientation, and other adapted wheels and frameworks may better reflect some people's experiences.

Use it inclusively

The behaviours described can be useful beyond the original gendered presentation, but the model should not be used to assume who can experience or perpetrate abuse.

Coercion, threats and intimidation

Using coercion and threats

This can include threatening to hurt somebody, leave them, expose private information, report them maliciously, harm themselves, take children away, or pressure the person into actions they do not want.

Using intimidation

Looks, gestures, actions or destruction of property can communicate threat without an explicit verbal warning. Smashing objects, damaging possessions, displaying weapons or harming pets may be used to create fear.

Why these behaviours can be powerful

Once somebody has learned that a threat may be carried out, the person causing harm may not need to use physical violence every time. A look, message, movement or reminder of a previous incident can be enough to change the other person's behaviour.

Impact matters

Someone may begin changing how they dress, speak, spend money, see friends, use their phone or organise daily life in order to avoid a reaction. That shrinking of ordinary freedom can be an important part of the pattern.

Coercive control and UK law

In England and Wales, controlling or coercive behaviour can constitute a criminal offence where the legal requirements are met. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 also recognises controlling or coercive behaviour within the statutory definition of domestic abuse.

Related resource

See **The Domestic Abuse Act 2021** resource in this collection for more about the statutory definition, post-separation abuse, children and legal recognition.

Emotional abuse, isolation and minimising

Using emotional abuse

Repeated humiliation, insults, ridicule, degradation or attacks on confidence can make somebody doubt their worth, judgement or ability to cope independently.

Using isolation

Control may involve limiting contact with friends, relatives, colleagues or services; monitoring where somebody goes; creating conflict with their support network; or making independent activities increasingly difficult.

Minimising, denying and blaming

A person may downplay what happened, deny abusive behaviour, insist the other person caused it, or portray the person experiencing abuse as unreasonable or unstable.

Why isolation matters

Isolation can increase dependency and reduce opportunities for somebody else to notice what is happening. It can also make leaving or seeking help harder because practical, emotional and financial support has gradually been reduced.

When somebody begins doubting themselves

Repeated denial and blame can make it difficult to trust one's own memory or interpretation of events. Rather than focusing only on whether every disagreement can be 'proved', it can help to notice the broader pattern and how the relationship affects safety, freedom and confidence.

A disagreement is not automatically abuse

Conflict can happen in non-abusive relationships. The concern is a pattern in which behaviours are used to dominate, frighten, restrict or control another person rather than ordinary disagreement between people with broadly equal freedom.

Children, privilege and economic control

Using children

Children may be used to pass messages, monitor the other parent, apply pressure, threaten loss of contact, undermine parenting or continue abuse after separation. Children can also be directly affected by the atmosphere and consequences of domestic abuse.

Using privilege or entitlement

The original Wheel describes 'male privilege' within its gendered context. More broadly, abusive entitlement can involve treating one person as subordinate, claiming authority over major decisions, expecting service or obedience, or using social roles to justify control.

Using economic abuse

Control can include preventing somebody from working, taking wages, restricting access to accounts, creating debt, withholding essentials, scrutinising spending or interfering with the person's ability to obtain or keep money, property, goods or services.

Economic abuse can continue after separation

Shared debts, housing, benefits, child-related costs, joint accounts or deliberate non-payment can sometimes be used to maintain control after a relationship ends. Economic abuse is expressly recognised within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 definition.

Children are victims in their own right

Under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, a child who sees, hears or experiences the effects of domestic abuse and is related to the victim or perpetrator is recognised as a victim of domestic abuse in their own right.

Using the Wheel thoughtfully

The Wheel can be helpful when it gives language to experiences that previously felt confusing or disconnected. It should be used as a prompt for reflection, not as a checklist someone must complete before their experience is taken seriously.

You do not need every section

A relationship does not need to contain all of the Wheel's categories to be abusive. Some people experience a small number of highly controlling behaviours; others experience many forms that change over time.

Physical violence is not required

Domestic abuse can involve coercive control, economic abuse, threats, stalking, emotional abuse or other patterns without physical assault.

Context changes meaning

Sharing finances, checking in with a partner or making joint decisions can be ordinary parts of a relationship when both people have genuine choice. They become concerning when they are imposed, monitored or used to create fear, dependency or restriction.

Questions for reflection

- Do I change ordinary behaviour because I am afraid of their reaction?
- Am I free to maintain relationships, interests and privacy?
- Can I disagree without fearing punishment, humiliation or retaliation?
- Do I have meaningful access to money, communication and transport?
- Are boundaries respected, including sexual boundaries?
- Has my world become smaller or more controlled over time?

Reflection is not a requirement to disclose

Someone can use these questions privately. They do not have to label their relationship, confront another person or make an immediate decision in order to seek confidential support.

Patterns beyond the original Wheel

Domestic abuse has evolved alongside technology and wider understanding of coercive control. Some experiences are not captured neatly by the original 1980s model.

Technology-facilitated abuse

Monitoring location, demanding passwords, accessing accounts, impersonating somebody online, using smart-home devices, repeatedly messaging, or tracking a person through shared services can become tools of control.

Post-separation abuse

Control may continue through stalking, harassment, finances, property, legal processes, child-contact arrangements, threats or digital monitoring after the relationship has ended.

Identity-related abuse

A person may exploit disability, immigration status, sexuality, gender identity, religion or other aspects of identity - for example by threatening to 'out' somebody, withholding accessibility support or exploiting dependence on care.

Other models can add perspective

Adapted wheels have been developed for different communities and experiences. No single diagram captures every form of domestic abuse. The most useful framework is one that helps somebody recognise their actual experience without forcing it into categories that do not fit.

Avoid turning the Wheel into a score

The number of categories present does not measure how serious an abusive situation is. Risk depends on the behaviours, escalation, threats, access to the person, individual circumstances and many other factors.

If you recognise these patterns

Recognising a pattern can bring relief, uncertainty, fear or conflicting feelings. There is no requirement to make a particular decision immediately.

Specialist support

A domestic-abuse service can help someone talk through what is happening, understand options and consider safety planning without requiring them to take one predetermined course of action.

Clare's Law

If there are concerns about a current or former partner's abusive history, the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme may be relevant. *See the dedicated Clare's Law resource in this collection.*

Safe Spaces

Participating pharmacies, banks and building societies continue to provide Safe Spaces where somebody experiencing domestic abuse can access a private room. *See the Ask for ANI resource for current information.*

Immediate danger

Call **999** if somebody is in immediate danger. If unable to speak on a mobile 999 call, follow the operator's instructions and press **55** when prompted.

If you are supporting somebody else

Listen without blaming, interrogating or insisting that the person leave. Avoid confronting the person causing harm where this could increase risk. Ask what support would feel useful and, where appropriate, help the person access specialist advice.

National Domestic Abuse Helpline - England

Refuge runs the free 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline on **0808 2000 247**. Current GOV.UK domestic-abuse guidance also lists additional specialist and nation-specific services.

Practical reminders

- The Wheel describes patterns of power and control, not only individual incidents.
- Someone does not need to experience every category for abuse to be serious.
- Domestic abuse can occur without physical violence.
- Ordinary relationship behaviours need context: mutual choice is different from imposed control.
- Abuse can continue or change form after separation.
- Technology, money, children and identity can all be used as means of control.
- The original model has a specific gendered history and should be used inclusively and with awareness of its limitations.
- Recognising a pattern does not obligate somebody to confront, report or immediately leave a partner.

A useful question

Rather than asking only “**Was this one incident abusive?**”, it can be useful to ask: “**What happens to my freedom, safety and choices across this relationship?**”

About this resource

This PDF provides general educational information about the Power and Control Wheel and domestic abuse. It is not a diagnostic tool, individual legal advice or a substitute for specialist risk assessment and safety planning.

Information reviewed: September 2026

References & further information

Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs (DAIP), Duluth. *Power and Control Wheel*. Original educational model developed from work with women experiencing domestic violence and men who used violence.

Home Office. *Domestic Abuse: statutory guidance*. Current England and Wales guidance on the statutory definition, controlling or coercive behaviour, economic abuse, children, technology and post-separation abuse.

Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Statutory recognition of domestic abuse including controlling or coercive behaviour, economic abuse, psychological or emotional abuse and children as victims in specified circumstances.

Home Office. *Controlling or coercive behaviour: statutory guidance framework*. Guidance on identifying patterns of behaviour and their cumulative impact.

Related resources in this collection

This final resource connects closely with **The Domestic Abuse Act 2021**, **Clare's Law** and **Ask for ANI / Safe Spaces**. Together, they provide different ways of understanding patterns, recognising legal protections and finding routes to support.