Ebook

How to recognise abuse in a relationship?

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M B S
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BEFORE YOU START

Your safety comes first

If you are reading this because something in your relationship worries you – it's good that you're here. Before you read on, keep these things in mind.

In immediate danger? Call 999

If it isn't safe to speak, call 999 from a mobile, listen to the message and press **55**. This is the Silent Solution – the operator will put you through to the police as an emergency. Staying silent on its own is not enough.

Free help, 24 hours a day

National Domestic Abuse Helpline: **0808 2000 247** – 24/7, confidential and non-judgemental. The helpline uses interpreters, so you can ask to speak in **Polish** or another language.

Protect your privacy

If someone may check your phone or computer, read this file in a private browser window, on a trusted person's device or at a library. Remember to clear your browsing history.

This ebook is for information and education. It does not replace advice from a specialist, solicitor or the police. Numbers and details checked in October 2026.

INTRODUCTION

Abuse doesn't always leave bruises

Many people spend years in a relationship that slowly takes away their peace, confidence and sense of safety – without ever calling it abuse. After all, "they don't hit me". "Every couple argues". "I'm the one who winds them up".

Domestic abuse is usually a **pattern of behaviour**, not a single row. It's about control: one person gradually takes power over another person's life – their time, money, friendships and, eventually, how they see themselves.

In this ebook you'll find 15 warning signs, a short self-check, a safety plan to fill in and a list of places in the UK where you can get help – including in Polish.

3.8m
people in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse in a year

2.2m
of them were women – but 1.5 million men were victims too

No. 1
most common form: emotional abuse by a partner or ex-partner

Source: ONS, Crime Survey for England and Wales, year ending March 2025 (published November 2025).

THE BASICS

What is domestic abuse?

Under UK law (the Domestic Abuse Act 2021), domestic abuse is behaviour by one person towards another when both are aged 16 or over and "personally connected" – for example, current or former partners, or family members.

Physical abuse
hitting, pushing, grabbing, strangling, restraining

Sexual abuse
forcing sex or sexual acts without consent

Threats and intimidation
threats against you, your children, pets or loved ones

Controlling or coercive behaviour
ongoing control, isolation, taking away your freedom

Economic abuse
taking money, controlling finances, building up debt in your name

Emotional / psychological abuse
humiliation, name-calling, manipulation, gaslighting

Myths that keep abuse hidden

"If they don't hit you, it isn't abuse."	Emotional abuse and control are abuse – and controlling or coercive behaviour is a crime in the UK.
"It only happens in certain families."	Abuse affects people of every age, culture, education level and income.
"They could just leave."	Leaving can be the most dangerous time. People need a plan and support – not judgement.
"Only women are victims."	Most victims are women, but men and people in LGBT+ relationships experience abuse too.

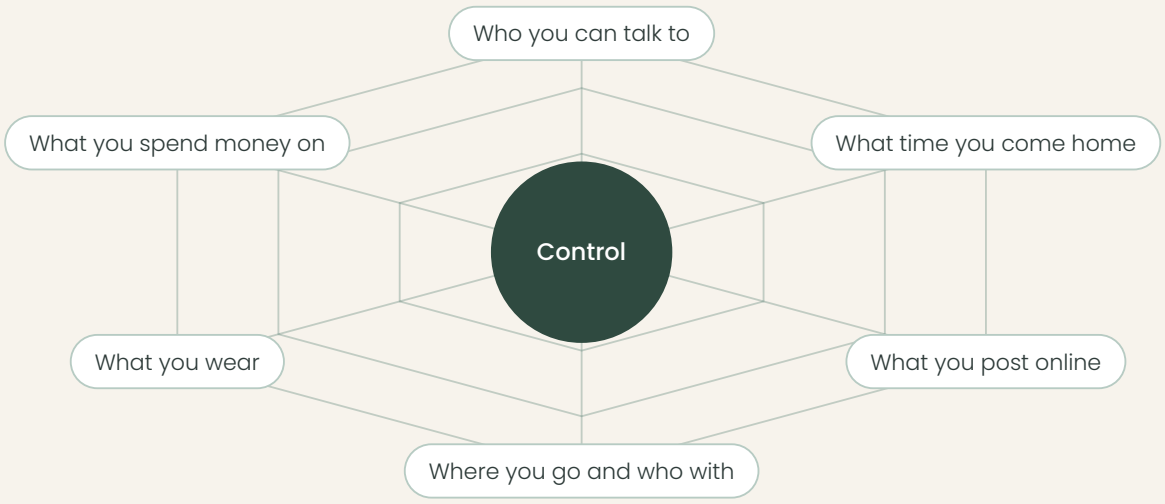
KEY IDEA

Coercive control – abuse like a spider's web

Coercive control is a web of small rules, bans and punishments that each seem "no big deal" on their own. Together they trap you: month by month you have less freedom, and it becomes harder to see what is happening.

In England and Wales, controlling or coercive behaviour in a relationship has been a criminal offence since 2015. Since 2021 the law also covers control **after separation** – such as harassment, threats or financial control by an ex-partner.

Typical "rules" in a controlling relationship



> **An important sign**
> If you often ask yourself "how will they react?" before doing anything – that is an important sign. In a healthy relationship you don't need permission to live your life.

15 WARNING SIGNS

What to look out for

We've grouped the signs into five areas. Each one includes an example of how it might sound in everyday life. One sign on its own doesn't always mean abuse – but several that keep happening form a pattern.

CONTROL AND ISOLATION

1 Isolation from loved ones

Your partner gradually cuts you off from family and friends: criticising them, causing scenes before you meet up, or making you feel guilty every time you go out. Over time you end up alone – and nobody sees what's happening.

> *"Why do you need your friends? You've got me."*

Need to talk? **National Domestic Abuse Helpline 0808 2000 247** – 24/7, free, interpreters available.

CONTROL AND ISOLATION

2 Control and excessive jealousy

Constant questions about where you are and who with, deciding what you wear, spend or where you work, accusing you of cheating without reason. Jealousy is often presented as proof of love – but love doesn't need control.

"Who are you messaging? Give me your phone."

3 Digital control and invading your privacy

Checking your phone, demanding passwords, tracking your location, reading your messages, installing spyware, banning you from posting photos. This is a form of abuse too – known as tech abuse.

"If you've got nothing to hide, give me your password."

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EMOTIONAL ABUSE

4 Manipulation and gaslighting

Questioning your memory and judgement until you start doubting yourself. Add criticism, mockery and "jokes" that leave you feeling small.

> *"You're overreacting. That never happened. You're making it up."*

Ask yourself

- [ ] I often doubt my own memory or judgement.

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EMOTIONAL ABUSE

5 Blame and no accountability

Every row, angry outburst or failure is your fault – or someone else's. The abusive person never admits mistakes, and conversations about problems end with you apologising.

> *"You make me react like this."*

Ask yourself

- ☐ I get blamed for the problems in our relationship.

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EMOTIONAL ABUSE

6 Threats and intimidation

Threats to throw you out, take the children, share private information or ruin your reputation. Sometimes threats of self-harm when you talk about leaving. Threats have one aim: obedience.

> *"If you leave, you'll never see the kids again."*

Ask yourself

- [ ] I hear threats – against me, the children, pets or loved ones.

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EMOTIONAL ABUSE

7 The cycle: tension and “honeymoon”

Periods of building tension, then an explosion, then apologies, gifts and promises. This cycle creates a powerful bond – the good moments give you hope that the “real” person will come back for good.

> *“I’m sorry, it will never happen again.”*

Ask yourself

- [ ] After rows there are apologies and promises, but it all comes back.

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PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE

8 Physical violence

Pushing, grabbing, hitting, throwing things, restraining. It often starts with a "small" incident and escalates. **Strangulation or choking – even once – is a serious warning sign of risk to life** and a separate criminal offence in the UK.

9 Sexual coercion

Pressure, emotional blackmail, forcing sex or acts you don't agree to, threatening to share intimate images. Being in a relationship or married does not mean consent.

"If you loved me, you wouldn't say no."

10 Breaking things and physical intimidation

A smashed phone, torn-up documents, punching the wall right next to you, hurting pets. The message is: "I could do the same to you".

MONEY AND INDEPENDENCE

11 Economic abuse

Taking your wages or bank card, giving you "pocket money", making you account for every pound, building up debt in your name, stopping you working or sabotaging your job. Lack of money is one of the biggest barriers to leaving.

> *"Give me your card, I'll handle the money."*

Ask yourself

- [ ] I don't have free access to money or my bank account.

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SIGNS IN YOU AND AROUND YOU

12 Living in fear

You walk on eggshells, check their mood before you speak, do things in secret to avoid a row. Being afraid of your partner is one of the most important signs – don't ignore it.

"Before they get home, I'll make sure everything is perfect."

13 Changes in you

Withdrawing from social life, anxiety, poor sleep, low mood, a feeling that you "don't recognise yourself". You may also start explaining or hiding your partner's behaviour from others.

"I used to be a completely different person."

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SIGNS IN YOU AND AROUND YOU

14 **Loved ones are worried**

Family or friends say you've changed, that they're worried about you or that something isn't right. From the outside, people often see a pattern that's hard to see from the inside.

"We're worried about you. You're not yourself."

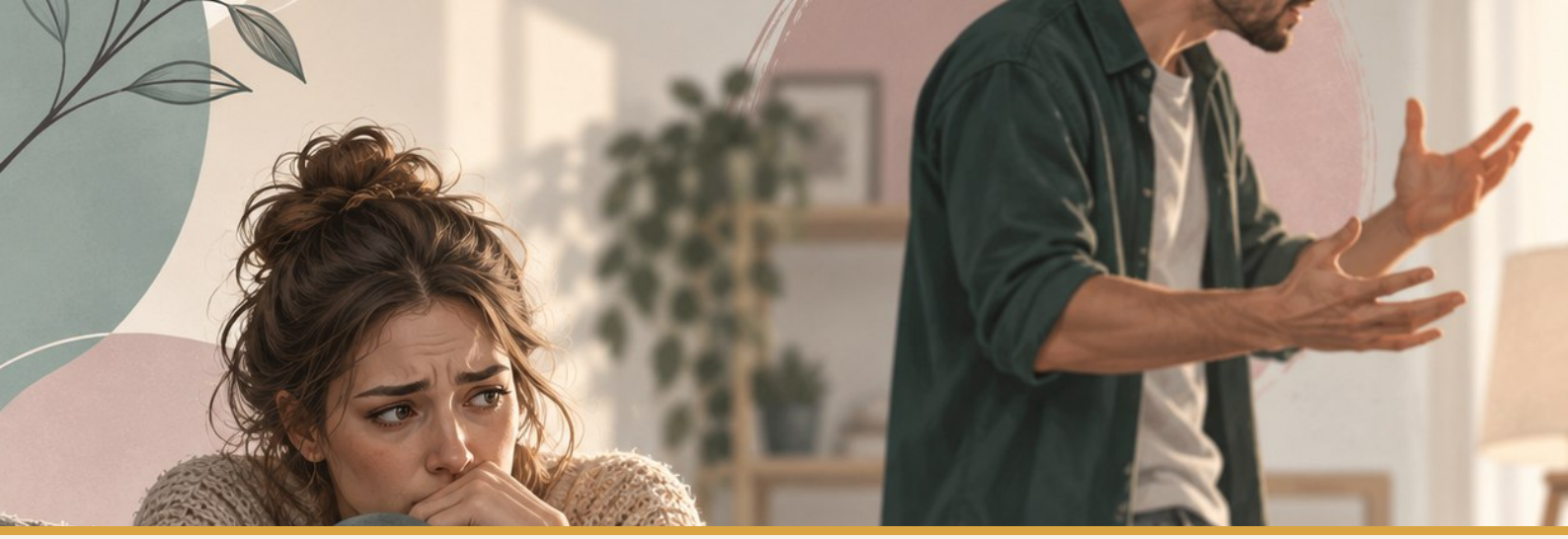
How to help someone you're worried about

Do

- talk privately, somewhere safe
- say: "I believe you. It's not your fault."
- listen without rushing or judging
- ask: "What do you need right now?"
- share 0808 2000 247 – the helpline advises friends and family too
- stay in touch, even if they go back to their partner

Try to avoid

- saying "just leave"
- confronting the abuser
- criticising their partner – it can shut the conversation down
- pressure and ultimatums
- making decisions for them
- discussing it on a phone that may be checked



SIGNS IN YOU AND AROUND YOU

15 The impact on children

Children hear and see more than adults think – even from another room. They may react with fear, withdrawal, anger, difficulties at school or problems sleeping. Under UK law, a child who experiences domestic abuse at home is a **victim**, not just a witness.

Since 2021, the law in England and Wales recognises that a child who sees, hears or experiences the effects of domestic abuse, and is related to the victim or the abuser, is a **victim of domestic abuse** in their own right.

Possible signs in a child

- nightmares, trouble sleeping, bedwetting
- separation anxiety, clinginess
- withdrawal or angry outbursts
- problems concentrating and learning
- guilt, taking on a "carer" role
- tummy aches and headaches with no medical cause

What helps

- telling the child it is not their fault
- a calm, predictable daily routine
- allowing all feelings
- letting the school know (Sefton runs Operation Encompass)
- specialist support for children
- looking after your own safety – that protects them too

SELF-CHECK

Does any of this sound familiar?

- [ ] My partner limits my contact with family or friends.
- [ ] I have to explain where I am and who I'm with.
- [ ] My partner checks my phone, messages or location.
- [ ] I often doubt my own memory or judgement.
- [ ] I get blamed for the problems in our relationship.
- [ ] I hear threats – against me, the children, pets or loved ones.
- [ ] After rows there are apologies and promises, but it all comes back.
- [ ] I have been pushed, hit, choked or strangled.
- [ ] I feel pressured or forced when it comes to sex.
- [ ] My partner breaks my things or hits objects near me.
- [ ] I don't have free access to money or my bank account.
- [ ] I'm afraid of how my partner will react and do things in secret.
- [ ] I don't recognise myself – I'm more anxious, low or withdrawn.
- [ ] People close to me say they're worried about me.
- [ ] Children see or hear rows or behaviour that frightens them.

What do your answers mean?

This isn't a diagnosis or a points-based test. But **even one "yes"** – especially to questions about fear, threats, physical violence or strangulation – is worth talking through with a specialist. If you've ticked several statements, you may be in a relationship based on control. You don't need to be sure before you call: **0808 2000 247** (24/7).

EXERCISE

My safety plan

A trusted person I can call or go to

Our code word that means "I need help"

A safe place I can go to (address)

How I would leave the house in an emergency (which way, how)

Emergency bag – what to prepare

- ☐ passport / ID, children's birth certificates
- ☐ bank card and some cash
- ☐ phone and charger, list of important numbers
- ☐ medication and prescriptions
- ☐ spare keys
- ☐ documents: tenancy agreement, certificates, NI numbers
- ☐ something for the children (a favourite toy)
- ☐ evidence: photos, messages, dated notes

My important numbers

Police – immediate danger: 999 (can't speak? press 55)
National Domestic Abuse Helpline (24/7): 0808 2000 247
Sefton Domestic Abuse Service: 0151 394 1400

WHERE TO GET HELP

You don't have to go through this alone

Police – immediate danger Can't speak? On a mobile, listen to the message and press 55 (Silent Solution).	**999**
National Domestic Abuse Helpline (Refuge) 24/7, free, interpreters available on request. Live chat: nationaldahelpline.org.uk	**0808 2000 247**
Sefton Domestic Abuse Service Local, confidential line for Sefton residents (incl. Waterloo and Bootle). Mon–Fri 8am–6pm.	**0151 394 1400**
Men's Advice Line Support for men experiencing abuse and those supporting them.	**0808 801 0327**
Galop – LGBT+ National helpline for LGBT+ people experiencing abuse.	**0800 999 5428**
National Stalking Helpline Help with persistent harassment and stalking.	**0808 802 0300**
Karma Nirvana Honour-based abuse and forced marriage.	**0800 5999 247**
Hourglass Abuse of older people.	**0808 808 8141**
Respect Phoneline For people worried about their own behaviour towards a partner.	**0808 802 4040**

Also worth knowing

- **Clare's Law** – you have the right to ask the police whether your current or new partner has a history of abuse. Apply through the Merseyside Police website or in person at a police station.
- **OPOKA** – a UK charity supporting Polish women and children affected by domestic abuse: opoka.org.uk
- **GOV.UK** – the official "Domestic abuse: how to get help" guidance is available in many languages, including Polish.
- **IDVA** – an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor can support you with the police, courts and safety planning. Ask the helpline about one.

Mind Balance Solutions CIC – support in English and Polish, in Waterloo and online.
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Mind Balance Solutions CIC

We are a community interest company based in Waterloo, Liverpool. We support community mental health – in English and Polish, in person and online. We are not a crisis service, but we can help you find the right support.

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This material is for education only and does not replace legal or medical advice or police help. If you are in danger, call 999.

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