

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU MEAN I’M BEING CONTROLLING?”: Gaining A Better Understanding Of What Controlling Behavior Is And How It Affects You And Others

Many people become confused and even quite upset if a partner or someone else in their lives accuses them of “being controlling” in their relationship together. And most people are all too quick to completely dismiss the notion that they are being controlling without really thinking about what the other person is actually trying to communicate to them or trying to understand what it really means to be controlling in a relationship.

The desire to have some control over what happens around us in our lives is a natural part of being human, often motivated by a drive to attempt to create some sense of stability, predictability, and safety in our environment. There are useful and healthy aspects of a desire to control, captured best by the idea of being in control of oneself (see the section about **Self-Control** below). There are also examples of the necessity of exerting some control over others, like the importance of parents providing guidance to children as they grow, the need for a teacher to provide some structure for students in the classroom, and the desire for a supervisor to have some control over what his or her employees are doing in the workplace.

Like many parts of your humanness, controlling behavior is on a continuum and everyone experiences varying degrees of a desire to control others and actual attempts to do this. But this desire to control becomes a glaring problem when it involves going to extremes to try to influence and dominate others around you. Attempting to “micromanage” your friends, your students, your employees, your children, or a partner in a intimate relationship becomes limiting and confining to you and to the people with whom you are doing this. It also gets in the way of building a safe, trusting, nurturing, and healthy relationship with that other person. Ultimately, people have to be able to decide who they want to be and how they will pursue that vision they have for themselves. This is true even if someone else believes that they should be a different person and think and act in another way. In the end, self-definition is a vital part of healthy living.

Shame-based families, where there tends to be rigidity and/or chaos, often create very controlling individuals. These people then leave their original families and do exactly the same thing in their adult relationships that they saw played out when they were growing up. Trying to control everything within yourself and around you is the cardinal rule of a shame-based system, whether it is a family or any other type of organization. Shame is always a part of being controlling. Shame can be defined as a way of looking at yourself, other people, and the world around you and a way of living your life based on control, perfectionism, blame, and reactivity that leads to cynicism, despair, and eventually stagnation (see other articles on this website for more information about shame). Toxic shame is always destructive to your own life, to those around you, and to your relationships with those other people.

Shame is generated by and actually contributes to enormous insecurity and self-doubt that we experience. In reality, controlling people don’t feel very good about themselves. They wouldn’t try so hard to control others in the way they do if they truly felt okay about who they were and about the lives

they are living.. Controllers often think to themselves: *“If others would just do what I want and see the world the way that I do, then everything would be fine for me and everyone else.”* Unfortunately, if you were raised in a shame-based family, where significant control was overtly or covertly manifested and where rigid and unrealistic roles of you and others were expected, you may have taken on some of the unhealthy aspects related to control. When control becomes an intense and all-consuming desire to be in charge or to force change in a person or situation and is then acted out by you in the relationship or the situation, it becomes a significant problem, often leading to manipulative, disrespectful, punishing, intimidating, and, sometimes, even violent behavior.

When people talk about someone being controlling, this generally refers to the category below called **Over-Control of Others** (you can see some specific examples there). In a shaming family, people are often taught that they are supposed to “take charge” of what happens around them (otherwise, they believe that things will spin “completely out of control”). Being in control of others and *“having things the way I think they should be”* is viewed as the primary way that your life can run smoothly and that you can feel comfortable in your daily living. In these types of families, control is also often viewed incorrectly as a sign that others respect, care about, and love you. So if someone is unwilling to follow your idea of who they should be, this becomes personalized by you and you may believe that *“others don’t really love me if they won’t do what I want them to do and be who I want them to be”*

The larger culture can also give you strong directives about who you are and should be and about the need to be in control. Just think about how a “real man” is supposed to respond to issues, problems, or conflicts according to society’s messages. Men, in these situations, are supposed to take charge and even “kick butt” if necessary. Women, in the past, have had fewer opportunities to directly exert control over others. But they have also been taught that it is okay to use manipulation and passive-aggressive behaviors (such as acting like a long-suffering martyr to instill guilt in others) to get what they desire. Even this, however, is changing in our present culture and, for many women, direct efforts to control others are becoming much more a part of their ongoing repertoire in their interactions with the people around them.

Shame-based and controlling individuals believe it is their “right” and even their “responsibility” to define other people and control life situations around them so that they can try to feel okay about themselves. They often believe that they know other people better than those people know themselves. Controlling people feel challenged and threatened by any reality, belief system, or way of being that does not conform to their way of thinking about and looking at the world. Different thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs are a sign of emotional distance and even an “affront” to the controlling person, who often feels attacked, rejected, and abandoned when any differences exist between them and those around them. Controlling behavior is, ultimately, designed to silence others and eliminate these signs of “differentness.”

Controllers violate others’ psychic and sometimes even their physical boundaries. Control can easily lead to emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. People whom you try to control feel as if they are being “nullified” since they are not allowed to be themselves or create their own reality. In the end, speaking or acting for others will not work. Eventually, the people you are trying to control will react and rebel, either overtly or covertly, and begin to emotionally distance from you. Being controlled in a family or a relationship is not what most people want. It is not safe and it is not respectful. **The only person you really have any control over is yourself.**

A desire to control can be masked in the idea that your controlling attitudes and behaviors are, in fact, really a sign of love and caring for the other person:

“I only say these things to you (or expect you to do this)...

...because I love you as much as I do (and so you need to change and do what I want you to do),”

...because I am only trying to take care of you (since it is evident that you can’t take care of yourself adequately)” and

...because I just want to ‘help’ (or ‘fix’) you (since you are not capable of ‘helping’ or ‘fixing’ yourself).”

This desire to control can also be presented in the guise of an entitled and arrogant belief that:

...”I know what’s best for you (so you need to do whatever I say you should do)” or

...”I know exactly what is wrong with you (and I’m the only one who can help you make it right and make you into a better person).”

But, in the end, these are simply variations on a theme designed to put the controller in charge of the other person and his or her life. Controllers often truly believe that they know best what that other person actually needs or wants. In many instances, they don’t even view their controlling attitudes or behaviors as stifling, hurtful, demeaning, disrespectful, or cruel.

Over-Control is always about self-doubt, insecurity, uncertainty, and a feeling of powerlessness. The controlling person is generally saying to himself or herself, *“What will happen if I let go?”* or *“Things will really fall apart if I don’t continue to try to maintain my control over this person (or situation).”* These kinds of thoughts can lead to an obsessive desire to hang onto a belief that they, in fact, do have to be able to try to control those around them.

Controlling behavior originates from a lack of self-awareness and healthy boundaries in the controlling person. As was mentioned before, people who have a strong desire to control others do not, in fact, feel very good about themselves. They often have an intense fear about “being wrong” and, in fact, feel inferior themselves beneath their sometimes “know-it-all” exterior. Essentially, they tend to base their shaky self-esteem on whether others will live according to the plan that the controller has in mind for them. Controlling people mix up their reality with that of another person. They believe that their controlling actions are absolutely necessary and that they, in fact, have the right to speak and act for others and define who those others should be.

Over-Control is actually a prison for both the person being controlled and the controller since both peoples’ options and choices are significantly limited when someone tries to exert power and control over another person. When controlling behavior occurs, it interferes with the other person’s ability to develop as a human being and to become the person he or she really wants to be. Controllers also create insecurity and dependency in others, and dramatically affect that person’s sense of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-respect, and well-being. The person being controlled often ends up ignoring or discounting their own thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, and intuition; they lose a sense of who they really are and want to be. Eventually, the person being controlled loses confidence, respect, freedom, safety, conviction, and, finally, even their “true self” (i.e. who they are or who they want to be).

There are also problems created for the controller by being a controlling person. The “down side” for the controller is that he or she assumes complete responsibility for the other person’s life. That can become an enormous burden. In addition, controllers are intensely fearful of separateness, “differentness,” and distance in their relationships but, in the final analysis, their controlling behavior

creates a self-fulfilling prophecy and actually ends up driving away those who are important to them. Finally, being controlling means that you will never actually look at and get to know who you really are. You are continually looking outside yourself at others around you. Focusing on and finding fault with others is a convenient path to avoiding personal responsibility and the potential for genuine growth and healing, both of which require introspection, self-awareness, and just plain hard work. In the end, being controlling with others stifles your ability to become the kind of person you may truly want to be. When all is said and done, who wants to be in prison, as either the jailer or the inmate? This is not a healthy or satisfying way to live.

People who basically feel okay about themselves do not need to force their feelings, thoughts, actions, and will on others. Nor do they have to assume that they know more than everyone else and, because of this “knowledge,” they then have the right to impose their “wisdom” on others (whether the others want it or not). Ultimately, other people have the right and the responsibility to direct their own lives, even if you disagree with how they are doing it. It is just not possible to force anyone else to live the “game plan” that you happen to have for them.

Paradoxically, the more you try to control people and things outside yourself, the more “out-of-control,” frustrated, victimized, and powerless you will end up feeling in your life. It is extremely aggravating when people won’t do what the controller “knows” is best for them. This often ends up simply fueling more and stronger attempts to control others which leads to an unrelenting cycle of misery for everyone involved. Trying to control other people and their behavior may work short-term to get what you want, but it just doesn’t work in any kind of ongoing manner; eventually they will “fight back” or move away from you.

People who are angry, especially when their anger is disrespectful, punishing, and explosive, have a desperate need to control what is going on around them. Control is a “given” whenever anger is present. You feel uncomfortable and you want something to change. And the more intense and severe the anger expression is, the more a desire to control is present in the person who is expressing the anger.

If an angry person is feeling unhappy about something, they may want the other person to “fix it” in order to allow them to get into a “happier” mood or to feel better about their situation. If they are feeling insecure, they may want someone to make them feel more secure and okay about themselves. If they are feeling threatened or fearful, they may want the other person to “back off” and stop whatever they are doing that feels scary to them. If things feel “out of control” around them, they may want someone to do something that will help them feel like things are more “in control.” But, sadly, the bottom line is that no one can do these things for you to “make you feel okay.” In the final analysis, you have to take responsibility for your own life, your own happiness, and your own sense of well-being.

Disrespectful and explosive anger does work, initially, to control people and situations. In fact, people who act this way often get what they want in the immediate situation. But the final result is generally not what they are seeking or expecting. Eventually, the people around them and their disrespectful anger feel fearful, intimidated, hurt, punished, and controlled and start to distance from that angry person, both emotionally and, in many cases, physically as well. They may even terminate the relationship completely.

In the end, it is important to realize that control is the antithesis of empathetic and genuine communication and emotional connection. The people in your life begin to disconnect from you the very

moment you begin to try to define them in your image. And the opposite is also true. Genuine emotional connection occurs when you “speak your internal truth” and honestly and openly talk about your reality and how you see the world and, at the same time, ask others, with a sense of authentic interest and acceptance, about who they actually are. Healthy and fulfilling connection with others recognizes, accepts, and even embraces the uniqueness and individuality of the other person.

Three additional aspects of control are also addressed in the sections below. When you become overly concerned with yourself and how you appear and act (see the section below about **Over-Control of Self**) or allow others to completely dominate you and your day-to-day life (see the section below about **Lack of Self-Control**), you end up suffering emotionally (and sometimes physically) as well. Finally, a more healthy aspect of control is discussed (see the section below about **Self-Control**). The definitions that follow talk about different aspects of control and identify qualities and characteristics that are a part of each. Look through the lists and see if any of these fit for you or other people in your life.

OVER-CONTROL OF OTHERS: Doing as much as you possibly can to attempt to dominate and take charge of the people and situations around you. This means frequently violating others’ personal boundaries through OVERT (e.g. being verbally demanding) or COVERT (e.g. being indirect and manipulative) methods. Over-Control can be related to:

- Having lower self-esteem
- Expecting and even demanding that others do what you want them to do and be who you want them to be
- Being aggressive and intrusive and invading others’ personal space and boundaries
- Not knowing or caring much about how you are affecting or impacting other people
...or denying, discounting, or dismissing feedback from others about how they are being affected by you and your attempts to control them
- Forcing unwanted advice, suggestions, and your “knowledge” and “wisdom” on others
...e.g. using unrelenting “logic” to convince others that what they think or feel is “wrong” or “bad”
- Speaking for other people or interrupting and speaking over others
- Attempting to be “one-up” in your relationships with others by being and acting grandiose, condescending, arrogant, and “holier-than-thou”
- Being “closed-minded” and unwilling or unable to see things from others’ perspectives
- Manipulating and being passive-aggressive to get what you desire
- Withholding information, being deceptive, or being overtly dishonest (“lies of omission” or “lies of commission”)
- “Playing the victim” and acting helpless, hopeless, and powerless to try to get your way
- “Playing the martyr” and using guilt and self-righteousness with others to attempt to get what you want
- Using bribes
- Shaming or discounting others
- Threatening, bullying, and intimidating others

- Using economic control
 - ...withholding money, making all the important financial decisions, deciding how money is to be spent, giving an adult partner “an allowance” that you alone have decided is appropriate for that person
- Trying to isolate others to maintain your power over them (e.g. from friends and family)
- Being critical and judgmental about others’ ideas, opinions, feelings, wants, and actions
- Using male entitlement:
 - ...e.g. *“I should make all the important decisions about your life because I am a man, which means I am more intelligent, more capable, and more competent than women are”*
- Using female entitlement:
 - ...e.g. *“I should have the final say, get what I want, and determine what happens in our relationship because I am a woman and I deserve to be pampered and taken care of by any man who is close to me”*
- Using emotional and/or verbal abuse with others
- Using physical and/or sexual abuse with others

LACK OF SELF-CONTROL: Allowing others to violate your personal boundaries by letting them dominate and take charge of who you are, what you think, what you feel, and how you act. This way of being can be related to:

- Having lower self-esteem
- Feeling worthless, inadequate, and incompetent
- Lacking self-knowledge (e.g. about your own thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs)
- Lacking self-confidence and self-respect
- Having difficulty identifying and articulating your own values, beliefs, and personal goals
- Feeling adrift and having little or no focus, purpose, or meaning in your life
- Being easily influenced and controlled by others and what they think, feel, want, and need
- Having little self-discipline (e.g. creating little structure and routine in your life)
- Having few clear personal boundaries for yourself
 - ...e.g. regarding time, space, and commitments
- Being passive and unwilling or unable to speak up for yourself and to set healthy limits with other people
- Acting helpless, hopeless, and powerless
- “Stuffing” anger, resentment, and other feelings until they come out in self-destructive ways
- Being “people-pleasing” and “co-dependent” in your relationships with others
- Allowing others to define who you are and direct what you do
- Being driven and motivated primarily by guilt, shame, and others’ expectations of you

OVER-CONTROL OF SELF: Keeping “too tight a rein” on who you are, how you express yourself, and how you experience your life. This way of being can be related to:

- Having lower self-esteem
- Feeling tense and anxious much of the time
- Having overly rigid and inflexible personal boundaries
- Being “tight,” constrained, and “very careful” in how you present yourself and interact with others
- Avoiding spontaneity and playfulness
- Being continually fearful about making mistakes, being judged and criticized, or appearing “stupid” or “silly” to others
- Being obsessive and compulsive in various aspects of your life
...e.g. regarding neatness, cleanliness, being on time
- Acting overly serious and somber
- Being unwilling to take risks and over-concerned with the idea of failing at what you might attempt to do
- Being perfectionistic
- Being untrusting, guarded, and unwilling to self-disclose and to be vulnerable with others
- Being “closed-minded” and unable or unwilling to see things from others’ perspectives

SELF-CONTROL: Making reasonable efforts to maintain control of yourself in your own life and to try to reasonably influence others, which involves sharing power equally, negotiation, and “give and take.” This way of being can be related to:

- Having higher self-esteem
- Knowing yourself and experiencing self-confidence and self-respect
- Having personal goals and dreams and actively pursuing them
- Knowing and living your beliefs and values
- Knowing and using your “personal power” vs. trying to exert “power over” others
- Being willing to take positive personal and work-related risks
- Maintaining a healthy discipline in your life
- Providing yourself with structure and routine in your daily living
- Having and maintaining clear and healthy boundaries for yourself
...e.g. about your body, your time, your space
- Having a clear sense of how your words and actions affect those around you
- Acknowledging and respecting other peoples’ personal boundaries
...including being willing to listen and take into account others’ thoughts, feelings, and perspectives
- Feeling empathy, compassion, and caring for other people
- Being accepting of differences between you and others
- Allowing yourself to experience all your emotions and allowing others to do the same

- Expressing your feelings openly, respectfully, and appropriately with others and encouraging others to do this with you as well
- Being direct, open, honest, and assertive with your thoughts, ideas, and opinions
- Offering guidance and wisdom to others without having the expectation that they will necessarily be who you want them to be, do what you want them to do, or “have a good attitude” about what you say to them or want from them
- Accepting that others truly do have a clear right to chart the course of their own lives
- Understanding what intimacy is and actively promoting caring and genuine emotional connection in your relationships with the important people in your life
- Being able to trust others whom you choose to have in your life and be vulnerable with them when appropriate

When thinking about being controlling with others in your life, you can reflect back on another version of the *Serenity Prayer* by Reinhold Niebuhr:

*“God, grant me the serenity to accept the ones I cannot change,
the courage to change the one I can,
and the wisdom to know it’s me.”*

Some of the ideas in this section are adapted in part from material written by Michael Obsatz, PhD