



Relational learning  
through  
consultation and  
reflection.



## Who Controls Your Relationship

Control issues arise with all aspects of a couples life together. Rarely are we prepared to deal with the power struggle that follows the romantic experience of falling in love and committing to our partners “for better or worst...”

Individuals vary as to how much control they want to exercise in the relationship, whether they want to be in charge or be taken care of, lead or follow. But we all are concerned about having sufficient say in what is happening in our relationship.

We want a say about how money is being handled/spent, if and where we go on vacations, how we discipline our children, who does the house work and are chores divided fairly. We want a say about our partners; what they do, say, wear, and even think. We want control over our sexual life, how often and what kind of sex we engage in. We want our career to be as important as our partner’s even if it has less earning power, we desire respect and validation. And we are deeply concerned about being controlled. We are concerned about getting what we want, what we believe we deserve and whether or not we are giving more that we are getting.

Much of our feelings and expectations about power and control are shaped by our childhood experiences. We struggled with our parents for independence. We competed with our siblings for attention and control. Unconsciously, we repeat our childhood experiences with issues of power and control in our relationship with our partner. Like the younger child we fight over:

- “This is all mine and I am not sharing”
- “I will not let any one tell me what to do”
- “I will do anything for you not to leave me”
- “I contribute more than you do”
- “I will get hurt if I relax my defenses”
- “I will be taken for granted if I give in”



In these power struggle experiences we continue our efforts to find a balance between being separate and autonomous while simultaneously staying close and intimate with our partner. We need to be able to share our deep feelings and thoughts while also maintaining our independent opinions, wishes, and wants. We need to give of ourselves while also maintaining confidence in our wholeness. Even in the most ideal love relationship we cannot escape issues of control, the need to compromise, give in, give up, share, extend ourselves for the other, sacrifice and accommodate. We might hear ourselves wishing that our partners would be less opinionated, that they would just agree with us, stop asking us questions, leave us alone, let us do what we wish... Loosening control, “giving in, admitting to a mistake, losing an argument might be experienced as surrender, defeat, becoming vulnerable humiliated . It is a threat to our very being.”

To truly love another, one needs to be able to step out of one's self and enter the other's world with an open mind and genuine curiosity. This is difficult especially if our memories of being in a loving relationship involve abuse, or abandonment. Thus being a loving partner evokes anxieties of loss of control. We want to know who is in charge of the relationship, who decides what and what is our say. To further complicate matters, men and women have different experiences with intimacy. Women are more relationally oriented and thus are more willing to sacrifice independence, give up control to experience intimacy. Men, on the other hand, are more sensitive about preserving their independence and thus are willing to sacrifice their need for closeness, more likely to fight for control in order to experience a sense of autonomy/separateness. Women typically will fight harder to preserve the relationship and make more accommodations, tolerate emotional suffering to maintain harmony. Women, more than their male partners, tend to relinquish control both in their relationship needs and in their career aspirations.

Other factors that add to the struggle over control in the relationship involve issues like money, who comes from a wealthier background, who makes more money, who is more attractive, who tends to have deeper dependency needs, who is better at some tasks, such as taking charge. Finally each partner has a conscious and unconscious agenda of wants and needs from the partner and the challenge of how to get it. This tension is the core of the power struggle in every relationship.

Relationship experts identified a variety of ways in which couples carry out this struggle for power and control in an effort to get their needs met.

### **Manipulation:**

This form of control is favored by individuals who attempt to get what they want while avoiding the confrontation of asking for or demanding it directly.

Examples of manipulation are;

Flattering or complementing the other in order to encourage them to continue doing what we want them to do "this so well dear.."

Expressing a wish but not asking directly for it: "Oh, it would be great to have a cup of coffee, but I am too lazy to get up," meaning, could you please get me what I want without really saying it directly.

Talking about someone else's situation rather than expressing one's own wish: Nancy's husband is so helpful with the kids.." Underlying message ; I wish you would be too".

### **Taking a one down position:**

This manipulation relies on presenting the self as weak, helpless, inadequate, sick. The message to the partner is that he/she is our life line and thus he/she must do as we ask and respond to our needs. Extreme expressions of this tactic are threatening a panic attack, heart attack, or suicide, if the partner does not come through. Individuals with chronic conditions like diabetes might mismanage their insulin take in order to control the partner who is fearful of leaving them alone as they cannot be trusted to manage their illness. This manipulation often turns the partner into a caretaker, often resulting in their own physical or emotional destruction. The needy partner is the one in control in this relationship.

### **Nagging:**

This manipulation depends on wearing the partner down to get one's wants granted. The partner continues to repeat the same complaint over and over until the partner is exasperated and consents to the first partner's wish.

## Subversion: (often referred to as passive aggressive)

This control style relies on appearing to be one way while doing something else. We say that we agree but somehow fail to accomplish what it is we agreed to. It is controlling without seeming controlling. We really meant to do it but “forgot” to follow through. We procrastinate, we get to our appointments late, we keep messing up, we get confused, we misunderstand, we lose track of time, while continuously reassuring the other of our cooperative intentions, “we just do not know how it happened...”

Another expression of this controlling tactic is to express neutrality about a subject, and when the partner make a decision we criticize or second guess their decision. As an example,

“I do not care which restaurant we go to”

“How about x?”

“I really do not like the food there....”

## Secrecy:

This manipulation is used to gain control, do what one wants, by keeping the partner in the dark – not letting them know. This can include having monies that the partner does not know about, making investments or gambling with marital assets without the partner’s knowledge, not sharing telephone messages, lies that might involve doing something we do not want the partner to know, carrying on a secret life, affairs, and not sharing concerns or problems for fear of partner’s reaction. By keeping a secret we maintain control over the situation and how we choose to handle it or not.

## Creating a reality:

This manipulation involves sharing information with one’s partner after one created a fact, did what he/she wanted to do. For example, one might book a trip, make a large purchase, invite a guest for dinner etc., and announce it afterward when the partner has no input into the decision. This partner will react offensively if his/her spouse expresses hurt or anger over not being consulted or having the opportunity to express his/her feelings/opinion on the matter. Such defensiveness may take the form of making the protesting spouse feel bad by accusations and attempt to induce guilt or simply declaring that one can do whatever one wishes and the partner cannot stop them. One asserts that he/she is the one who makes the money, which he/she states, justifies their freedom to make decisions without consulting the partner. Another way of creating a reality is by going ahead without explanations, apology or permission.

## Coercion:

This form of control involves aggressive behaviors toward the partner such as intimidation through verbal or physical abuse, yelling, criticism, ridiculing, interrupting, shaming in private or in public, making threats like; “I will leave you,” or an extreme form, “I will kill you” or “I will kill myself if you....”

It is believed that persons who resort to these control tactics, suffer from lack of confidence, are insecure and feel generally powerless and have low self-confidence. Others might have a history of experiencing getting whatever they wanted when they wanted. They might have difficulty relating to their partner as an individual with rights, wants and needs, that are valid, but rather see the partner as an object whose sole purpose is to satisfy their wants. These persons feel a strong sense of entitlement and thus deny their partner’s rights to be a separate individual with thoughts beliefs and wants separate from themselves. These forms of control, while widely believed to be primarily preferred by males, can also be exhibited by women who choose to intimidate their partners through physical and verbal acting out.

## Reward:

This form of control involves conditional gifting. “If you do this for me I will buy you...” “give you...” “make you feel...” “have sex...” It can involve buying expensive gifts or showering the partner with praise. In this dynamic, one partner is taking a one up position toward the other where he/she has the authority to approve or condemn the other’s feelings or behavior while the other assumes a one down position, seeking his/her approval.

## Expert:

This form of control involves assuming the position of the expert, the one who knows THE TRUTH. The core assumptions behind this position are that; “I am smarter,” “I know better,” “I am the professional,” “I am older,” “I had more experience.” This person controls the situation by statements like: “Your way is wrong,” “It is too hard to explain this to you therefore I will take care of it or you need to do what I say,” “you need to trust me on this.” This dynamic is played out in conversations where one-person’s needs to have the last word, to be the “decider.”

It is important to recognize that this dynamic can develop between two persons who collude in establishing a hierarchy of one being the leader and one being the follower, one playing the adult role and the other adopting a more childlike position. Deferring to the expert, one is able to avoid assuming adult responsibilities for their life.

A similar dynamic might be established between couples where one partner feels luckier than the other to be in the relationship. This is true for example when couples come from families of different financial background, social status, or different education levels.

## Withholding:

This form of control involves one partner distancing from the other, withholding affection, stonewalling, giving the silent treatment, leaving the room or the house in a heated moment, refusing to dialogue about a matter that upsets the other, refusing to share feelings or thoughts, responding to partner’s inquiry “what is the matter?” with “...nothing,” denying having feelings which one is acting out, rolling one’s eye or shaking one’s head with disapproval, insisting on the other person needing to guess what they feel or want rather than sharing it with them. Withholding sex either by coming up with excuses of headaches, etc., being passive and unresponsive to the partner’s love making attempts, ejaculating prematurely, all are examples of forms of control. These forms of acting out attempt to communicate that “all you have to do is give me my way and I will stop these hurtful behaviors that aim to cause feelings of guilt, humiliation, abandonment, and deprivation.

## Negotiation:

This style of getting one’s wishes or wants relies on negotiating, bargaining, and compromising, making an offer that the partner cannot refuse in order for him/her to agree to go along with one’s wishes. In extreme situations, the survival of the relationship might depend on how a couple is able to resolve the differences between them via this style of negotiation. This style of dealing involves small matters varying from which restaurant or TV show to watch to important issues like having children, where to live, and how to relate to extended family members. The need to negotiate gives power to one partner who needs to be convinced to grant the other what he/she wants.

This dynamic can be exhausting as individuals in this relationship feel that satisfying their wishes requires a struggle. Most of us prefer to experience a sense of ease in expressing our wishes to our partner and have him/her respond positively because he/she knows that this is important to us. We do not generally want to have to explain justify or/and to negotiate every time to get what we want.

## Conclusion:

Studies on relationship satisfaction find that the happiest couples are those who share the power of decision making. More specifically it is not about who has more control in the relationship but rather about the tactics used by the partner who exercises greater control. Are the tactics he/she chooses – loving and supportive or punitive and hurtful. Some couples are stuck in a permanent power struggle where the same partner is always in control or has more power. Other couples manage to shift the power between them. In an abusive cycle, for example, the abuser gains power and control through verbal and/or physical intimidation, hurting the partner, only to end up experiencing deep guilt that the abuser handles by acting submissive and agreeable until this one down position evokes his/her feelings of helplessness and humiliation, which triggers his/her need to assume the upper hand by becoming abusive again. Women who are more successful or earn more money than their partners, might balance the power by assuming more responsibilities in the household, or acting more submissive at home in an attempt not to hurt what they perceive is their partner's fragile self esteem.

Couples can achieve a loving balance by sharing the value that they are each equal in the relationship. Each believes that the partner is intelligent, capable and competent. These couples understand that both of them makes an important contribution to the relationship and to each other's happiness and satisfaction. Furthermore, they respect and cherish their differences as an important value in this process recognizing that neither one has the ultimate "truth." Rather they cherish and respect the relational space between them that guides the decisions as to who has more influence at certain times based on the challenges they confront in their life journey.

This article is based on Judith Viorst book: *Imperfect Control* Chapter 5 "Who Controls The Couple"