

BREAKOUT!

**HOW TO RECOGNISE OR RECOVER FROM A CONTROLLING
RELATIONSHIP**

INTRODUCTION: TURTLE SOUP.

When I was a child, children's books were not as "nice" as they are today. Perhaps that's why I still remember some of them. There was one particular illustration in a book, supposedly showing how "turtle soup" is made. I didn't know if there was really such a thing as turtle soup- still don't in fact- but the picture was fascinating. The turtles all looked very happy as they queued up to jump into a big warm bath. The ones already floating in it looked very happy and relaxed. At the bottom of the bath was a tap from which cans were being filled with turtle soup. At some point the turtles had turned into soup. But until then, they were enjoying a comfortable warm bath. And by the time they realised what was happening they were too weak and floppy to jump out.

Like those turtles, people can be changed into something they had never intended to become. If they'd seen it coming they'd have run a mile. Controlling relationships can feel very comfortable at first. You're with someone who protects you (or whom you protect in some cases). They're not like anybody else you ever met. And your life before you met them feels so different, it's as if you were a different person back then. And perhaps you have indeed become a different person, moulded and re-created for your partner's benefit, without you even noticing what's going on.

Most of what I've seen online about controlling relationships is focused on the partner. And maybe because these articles are mostly in women's magazines, the controlling partner is assumed to be a man, and his victim a woman. But in fact the methods of psychological control discussed in this EBook can be used by anyone, male or female, straight, gay or lesbian. The controller does not have to be physically intimidating. They may even use their apparent vulnerability to make you feel bad about having your own preferences and needs. Indeed the whole point of psychological control is that it makes physical force unnecessary.

I could have written a lot more about why some people feel the need to control others. The short answer is weakness. A strong-minded healthy personality is comfortable with other people's freedom, while a weak personality feels intensely threatened by it. But I'm not going to say much more about the psychology of controllers, because I want you to be focusing on yourself. You need to start undoing the damage that's been done to you.

Even if your controlling partner one day realises the error of his or her ways, they'll probably be in greater need of help to change than the partners whose confidence they've undermined. You might even feel sorry for them, but that doesn't mean you are best-placed to help them. Any more than a barman could do much for a recovering alcoholic!

So this is all about you. How would you know if someone has been working on you, possibly for weeks or months already, to change you into their dependent plaything? How to recognise when your warm bath is actually a saucepan? And even more important, how to undo the damage of a controlling relationship, reclaiming your own personality and becoming the person whom you choose to be?

PART ONE: HOW A PARTNER TAKES CONTROL.

As a therapist helping people re-create themselves I've had the opportunity to study how some people take control of others, erasing their previous personality. In most cases the controllers seem to have a natural talent for manipulation. But some may have actually taken online courses in it, or even had expensive personal tuition from experts on the dark side of the "pick-up" scene!

These experts are truly sinister. They claim to make their students promise not to use their methods to cause psychological harm to anyone. But this is nonsense of course. Their methods of manipulation involve cultivating irrational fears and eroding the natural confidence that adults have in their own ability to make choices for themselves. The people at the receiving end of these techniques are always damaged by them. If they're not damaged then the method hasn't worked. Indeed, the only outcome that these teachers seem to really fear is that a mentally-enslaved partner will become a stalker, pursuing her controller, desperate for his attention, even when he has tired of her and wants to cast her aside like a worn-out toy.

The methods taught by the sinister "gurus" are based on subtle techniques derived from behavioural psychology, hypnosis, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), police and military interrogation methods, and the brainwashing methods of extremist cults. These methods make use of certain characteristics of the normal human mind. They call them "weaknesses" and often imply that they're specific to the female mind, however this is just a sales pitch. Their customers are predominantly male heterosexuals, therefore the normal target is assumed to be a woman. In fact the same methods can be used on anyone, by anyone.

By the way, most people who create controlling relationships have not learned their methods from a book or video or private teacher. They have just picked up the techniques in the normal course of their life experience. I only refer to the online courses because they present the methods used in the clearest and most systematic way. But actually the most dangerous manipulators are the ones who have a natural talent and don't need to do a course. The students of the "seduction experts" mostly lack the normal social skills required to use their methods effectively.

Either way, it's a safe bet that if any one discovered that their new partner had been using techniques to mentally enslave them by destroying their confidence, they would end that relationship immediately. However, when these methods are used skilfully, the person at the receiving end will not see their partner as manipulative, but rather as their rescuer, their protector, their infallible guide, the one who has enlightened them and shown them the world as it really is.

It's like spotting a psychopath. Most people assume a psychopath would be a scary and off-putting character whom you'd instinctively avoid. Wrong! We think psychopaths look scary because we're used to seeing them in mugshots after they've been caught. But how would they have looked before they were arrested? I've met a good many psychopaths. I can tell you that in any group of people, the psychopath is probably the one you'll want to please, the one for whom you find yourself breaking your own rules.

For example, in my previous career as a mental health nurse I knew of a few cases of female nurses having affairs with male patients. This is about the ultimate taboo in the mental health professions, and is much less common than you might suppose. Getting caught would almost always mean the end of your career. In every case I encountered, the patient concerned was a psychopath.

It's the same with the creator of controlling relationships, who by the way will often have psychopathic tendencies. They are best detected not by looking at them directly, but by seeing the effect they have on other people, by the changes in your own thinking and behaviour when you've been around them for a while. Let's take a closer look. How long have you been cooking?

STAGE ONE: BECOMING EMOTIONALLY TRAPPED.

Do you feel safe in your partner's company despite the scary things that are always happening when you're together? Is your partner always part of every experience you enjoy? Is life boring or scary whenever you're not with your partner? Does your partner already know your most embarrassing and humiliating secrets? Is your life with your partner an emotional rollercoaster, with rapid switches between anxiety and relief? Did you feel tremendous relief when your partner rescued you after having left you stranded in an unfamiliar place?

You may be in the first stage of being **Emotionally Trapped**. The would-be controller's problem is that in reality you could get on fine without them. Due to the high death rates throughout most of human history we're well-adapted to survive the end of a relationship. And most of us can form relationships with a variety of people, not just one. So the controller needs to create the illusion that life without them would be long stretches of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror. You're naturally attracted, and soon attached, to your protector. But what do they protect you from? Would you have even been in that situation if you hadn't been with them?

Think of the last five really great experiences you've enjoyed. Did every one of them involve your new partner? Do they insist on being part of every event that your friends or family have planned?

This might seem very harmless or even desirable at first. Most people want their partner and their family to get along. At this stage the controlling partner may make a special effort to form a good relationship with your family. This works especially well if your parents or older brothers and sisters have always been in control of you. If that's their attitude it may seem natural for them to now "hand you over" to your partner's authority. But in any case the new controlling partner will typically want to be at any family gathering or holiday, even if this means joining in activities in which he or she has no interest whatsoever. They don't care what the activities are. All they care about is making sure that every enjoyable event in your life has them in it. This suggests to your subconscious mind that there is no pleasure in your life except the pleasures which involve your partner. The next step is to convince you that it was your partner's presence that made the experience enjoyable, therefore your partner is really all you need.

Now think of the five most embarrassing or even shameful secrets you've ever shared with anyone, including best friends, family and professionals like doctors. How many of them have you already shared with your new partner? And how long did that take?

Knowledge is Power, and you've given that power to your partner. What did they give in return?

Now I know a lot of people think that couples should have no secrets from each other. And for sure, too many secrets might indicate that they distrust each other. This would be a bad sign, because

trust is the foundation of any strong relationship. However, while we need trust in our relationships, we also need some privacy as individuals. Every cell in your body has a wall around it, without which it would just dissolve. Likewise your personality needs the wall of privacy to keep it whole.

Supposing your thoughts were being broadcast from your brain for everyone to hear? People suffering from the mental illness called schizophrenia may actually imagine that this is happening. It is a horrible experience! We need that boundary around our innermost selves. We need to know the difference between our own thoughts and other peoples' thoughts. Otherwise we wouldn't know if we had decided something for ourselves, or if the decision had been made for us by another person.

The controller aims to train you to voluntarily disclose all of your thoughts and feelings to them. But until they've done this they will keep you under surveillance. Nowadays this generally involves electronic media, looking at your text messages, emails, and social media activity. For example, when a woman puts a new picture of herself on social media, and her partner immediately checks everyone who has "liked" the picture, and asks about any of them who happens to be male. (Or female if they are a lesbian couple). We all know women who like to boost their own self esteem by constantly putting up flattering pictures of themselves on social media. Normally we "like" the new picture and move on. It costs nothing and it makes our friend happy so why not? But the controller sees these online "likes" as a threat to his or her control. This may be due to the controller's own insecurity. Or it may be that because they think everyone else is playing the same game as themselves.

The same pattern often occurs around anything a woman does that makes her more attractive, even as a side effect of some other goal such as getting healthier by losing weight. Because his own behaviour is so often guided by hidden motives, the controller typically assumes that everyone else has hidden motives too. It doesn't matter if you lose weight to improve your health, or dress attractively to please yourself, the controller will assume you're doing it to attract other people to have sex with. That's why the controller would do these things, so he or she assumes that you would have the same motives. People normally assume that other people think the same way as they do, even when their own thinking is actually very twisted.

On the subject of losing weight, you've probably heard of the particularly unpleasant type of controller known as the "Feeder." These people do not have the psychological skills I'm discussing here, so they need a more direct method of cutting out the competition. They do this by ensuring that their partner is as unattractive as possible to the average man or woman. The easiest method is to encourage them to gain a huge amount of weight. Some women have been overfed till they were unable to walk or even get out of bed. One woman needed oxygen because her body had become so immense that breathing ordinary air was not enough to keep her alive! Of course this is very unusual. A much more common and subtle pattern, which I've often seen, is where a woman begins to lose weight, and her partner pretends to be pleased and "rewards" her with a box of chocolates! If she refuses them he will put on a sad face and make her feel bad about herself, which in someone who's previously become overweight will typically result in comfort eating. You might suppose that these men are actually attracted to obese women, but this is not the case. They actually find obesity very unattractive, and assume (correctly) that most other men feel the same way. They would rather their partner be very unattractive and even physically ill, than risk of someone else being attracted to her.

An even more extreme example, quite common in countries where strong acids are easily obtained, is to deliberately disfigure the partner. If this is threatened even once you should go straight to the police. These horrific crimes do happen even in Britain so the threat must be taken seriously.

The most extreme example of intrusion on a partner's privacy is where the controller actually stalks his partner, even parking outside her place of work to monitor who is going in and out.

If your partner is stalking you instead of going to work, then you get away as fast as possible. This level of jealousy is associated with a high risk of extreme violence. Remember that when women are murdered, a jealous partner or ex-partner is by far the likeliest culprit.

However this EBook is mainly aimed at people who have experienced the more subtle kinds of psychological manipulation. Men who threaten their partners with extreme violence or use obesity to trap them do not normally have the necessary skills or intelligence to use the methods I'm discussing here.

The next method of establishing control is the Emotional Roller Coaster.

Think of the first three times you were together. Remember how you felt as you either said goodnight or fell asleep. Good, probably, otherwise you wouldn't still be together. But now go back over that evening or that day. Do you recall a frequent and constant rapid switching between sad and happy, safe and secure, worried and relieved? In particular, did you several times experience a wonderful feeling of relief? Relief from what bad feeling? And how had that bad feeling been created?

You've seen the technique a hundred times in movies and on TV. It's the good cop/bad cop routine, and it's massively effective. Faced only with the "bad cop" you might discover unsuspected powers of resistance. But the "good cop" has you drop your guard, so you're all the more vulnerable when the bad cop reappears.

Psychologists call this a "variable reinforcement ratio." They use this pattern in experiments where mice or pigeons or even cockroaches are trained to perform complicated tasks. When rewards and punishments are given out in an unpredictable pattern, the animal being punished or rewarded learns quicker than if the rewards were more predictable and "fair." The exact same rule applies whether it is birds, animals, or people.

Humans evolved from animals. When we became human, we did not lose the animal brain with its simple reactions. We simply added another layer of brain on top. Even the most intelligent human beings have a reptile brain controlling basic appetites, a mammal brain where we experience emotions, and finally an intelligent brain for thinking logically. The intelligent brain “cuts out” when we’re overwhelmed by any strong emotion. Indeed almost all our decisions are based on emotion rather than intelligence. This is why humans can be trained by the exact same methods used on animals. It’s only the rewards offered that are different.

The simplest way to create the emotional rollercoaster is for the controller to create a potentially violent confrontation in a public place. The rougher type of bar is usually chosen for this scene. Your new partner instigates a confrontation, ideally by accusing some total stranger of eyeing you up, touching you inappropriately, or disrespecting him. Immediately you feel tense and anxious, because like most normal people you’re frightened and horrified by anything to do with real violence. But the confrontation soon blows over, leaving your partner looking like a winner.

Being obsessed with psychological domination and control, he has made sure to pick on someone who will back down quickly, even if they are physically stronger. So now your previous feeling of intense fear and horror is replaced by equally intense relief. You feel that the world is a dangerous place in which confrontations can appear from nowhere. But you also feel that your partner can protect you from these dangers. Because emotion is always stronger than rational thinking, you don’t notice that the whole scene was deliberately created by your partner.

In fact you can’t even remember clearly how it all started. That’s because of how human memory works. Memories are “filed” under the emotions associated with them. So now that you’re feeling safe and relieved, it’s hard to remember clearly what happened earlier when you felt unsafe and afraid. Psychologists call this “State Dependent Memory.”

Another common method is for your partner to take you somewhere unfamiliar in his car, probably for a day trip or holiday, then engineer a row and drive off leaving you stranded and disorientated. Being left alone triggers an intense emotional reaction in anyone. This is because humans are a “social animal.” Our ancestors always lived in close-knit communities, dependent on each other for food, fire, shelter and protection. To be cast out from the tribe was a death sentence. As with the confrontation scene, the feelings triggered are strong enough to overwhelm all rational thinking. So when your partner eventually returns you actually feel grateful for being rescued, rather than furious about being abandoned in the first place! Of course it works even better if you partner can convince you that the argument was your fault.

Not all emotional rollercoasters involve your partner looking powerful. They might engineer a situation where they threaten self-harm or suicide as a reaction to something you have said or done which they don’t like. The same pattern is created- sheer terror followed by intense relief, leaving you determined never to upset your partner in that way again. Less extreme versions of this method might involve your partner refusing to speak or eat for a long period. This also brings your caring, parental instincts into play. You feel like it’s your duty to look after them. An older partner might threaten you by complaining of chest pains, especially if there’s a history of genuine illness. I have

known middle aged men who kept their whole family on tenterhooks by this method. No one dared to oppose them in any way, for fear they might give dad a fatal heart attack.

I've said earlier that most "controllers" seem to have a natural gift for emotional manipulation, and do not have to study these techniques. Those who have studied them might try some more elaborate mind games to intensify the emotional roller coaster effect. This would typically involve telling you a "true story" about their own experience which would switch you rapidly from sadness to happiness, and from fear to relief. You might experience several switches back and forth, though the end result will always be to leave you feeling very positive about your partner. Before beginning such a story the controlling partner will want to get you into a hypnotic state. This does not require any of the tricks you might have seen used by stage hypnotists, let alone the gentler methods normally used by hypnotherapists. You will generally not feel hypnotised. But what is hypnosis anyway? Scientists who spend their lives studying hypnosis are still not fully agreed on what hypnosis actually is. However, they do agree that hypnosis involves an intense focus of attention.

Hypnotic techniques are not the only method of creating this intensely focused attention. But whatever methods the controlling partner uses, the result is the same. As they tell their story, you are aware of nothing else but their words, their tone of voice, their expression, and the touch of their hand. You could be in a noisy crowded bar but it feels like you're alone together. Now of course, you could feel like that listening to any good storyteller! Just because someone tells interesting and emotionally moving stories doesn't mean they're messing with your mind. What you need to look for is the pattern.

**Think back to some "true stories" that your partner has told you.
Do they all create the same intense roller coaster of emotion,
which always leaves you feeling that your partner's very special
and that you are safe and happy in their company and nowhere
else?**

STAGE TWO: ENTERING THE BUBBLE WORLD.

When did you last see, or even contact, your family or friends? Has your partner now become “your everything?” Are you already living in, or thinking of moving to, a place where you won’t know anyone except your partner? Do you feel you don’t need anybody else? Have you come to feel that none of your family and friends are good for you?

The water is getting hotter, and you may now be in the second stage of the **Bubble World**. Imagine the most secure prison you’ve ever heard about, maybe even an entire prison planet in a sci-fi movie. It might be guarded by high walls, lasers, minefields, armed guards, or whatever. But so long as the “outside” exists, there must always be a possibility of escape. Prisoners will be constantly thinking about the outside, and making plans to get back there, alert to every brief opportunity of escape. But what if there was no outside? Or if the prisoner’s memory of life before prison could be totally erased, which would have the same effect? They wouldn’t even think about escaping, because “escape” has no meaning if there’s nowhere to escape to.

Take a minute to think about your family and friends. Check your phone or social media to see how often you’ve been in touch over the past month. Now scroll right down and pick another month from before you met your partner. Spot the difference. Now ask yourself, am I bothered?

If the answer is “not really,” you have definitely entered the second stage of mental enslavement. You used to value those relationships. So how did you come to feel that they meant nothing to you? Did somebody persuade you? If you feel like your former friends and family are really surplus to requirements, you may be entering what I call the “bubble world,” a state of mind created by your new partner, in which everything outside of your relationship is meaningless.

Let’s test the bubble now. Imagine for a minute that you’re not together any more. Just do it. Did that feel sad? Or did it feel terrifying? Or did you not actually do it? Could you not force yourself to imagine such a thing, even for one minute?

This is actually a common reaction when a life sentence prisoner is unexpectedly released due to winning an appeal or even someone else confessing to the crime for which they were imprisoned. You might expect that they would be overjoyed, but actually they may react with terror and confusion. During the 1970s several innocent people were wrongfully convicted of terrorist bombings which were actually carried out by other people. When one of these wrongfully convicted persons was told she was to be released, her immediate reaction was to worry about who would

take over the vegetable garden which she had been looking after in the prison. This felt more important to her than the world outside. It was as if the world outside did not exist.

Just to recap, in the first stage the outside world is made to look frightening, but in the second stage the outside world seems unreal and of no importance. This is a stronger bind, because we can overcome fear if we are motivated, but we are not motivated to overcome indifference. If something doesn't matter to us, we do not generally try to make it matter.

Remember that all these methods of manipulation are designed to work on normal people. If you fell for them that doesn't mean you're weak or deficient in some way. It simply means you're human.

STAGE THREE: PERSONALITY MELTDOWN.

Think back to a month or so before you met your partner. Remember what you believed back then, what mattered to you. Has knowing your partner been a revelation to you that the world is quite different to what you formerly believed? Do you now feel that before you met your partner you were never really happy, even if you thought you were? Do you worry how your partner will react when you make a decision independently? How often in the past week have you asked permission? Does it always seem to turn out badly when you don't? Have you done anything in the past week that your partner doesn't know about, or won't find out about? Do you often doubt your own memory, when your partner tells you what actually happened?

The soup is now simmering nicely, and you're at the third stage of **Personality Meltdown**. Before remoulding you into the perfect image he or she requires, your partner must persuade you to despise your old self and the values and connections associated with it. You won't fight to hang onto something you no longer value.

The controller wants above all to break down your ability to make decisions for yourself. And when you frequently or always feel the need to ask permission, your ability to make decisions for yourself is already being ground down. Before this relationship you made decisions every day, and thought nothing of it. Sometimes they turned out well, and sometimes not. That's life. The point, you made your own decisions then and now you don't.

Think back to the last few times that you asked your partner for permission and your partner said no. Was any real reason given? And if the reason was "because I say so!" did that feel okay? If it did then you are halfway to frog soup already. How would that "request denied" have felt a year ago?

What happens when you go ahead and make your own decision anyway? If it always turns out badly, how does that happen? Is the "badly" just your partner's reaction? Does that now feel so much more important than any other outcome, good or bad? Your partner's reaction doesn't have to be spectacular by normal standards. By this stage in the process, a long cold silence could be as effective as a slap in the face. From the controller's point of view, the important lesson you must learn is that making decisions for yourself will always end badly.

The intelligent controller will not begin by trying to impose total control on every aspect of your life, unless of course he or she knows that you already have a very dependent personality. In most cases you will have at least an average ability to make decisions, so the controller will need to break this down very gradually so you don't know what he's doing till the damage has been done. Boiling a frog, remember?

He or she will therefore begin by requiring very small changes in your behaviour. So small in fact that arguing about them would seem unreasonable and childish. Now you might think that your partner obviously cares about it, and you don't care one way or the other, so why not just do as you've been asked? You've lost nothing and you've made your partner happy. In a healthy relationship that would be fair enough. But in the healthy relationship your partner would be equally willing to change his or her behaviour to please you. You would have the same motivation, to make each other happy.

In the controlling relationship it is you who will be making all the changes, because the change itself is not really what it's about. Your partner probably don't care in the least whether you wear the red shirt or the blue shirt. What they really want is for you to wear the blue shirt simply because they told you to.

Clothing, hairstyle, and other details of appearance are indeed some of the most common areas where control begins to be imposed, certainly where it's a man getting control over a woman. Clothing and hairstyle has been a means of controlling women for thousands of years, mainly because these are a way for a woman to express her sexuality, and the controlling male partner wants to reserve the woman's sexuality for himself alone. So generally it's about "dressing modestly" whatever that's supposed to mean. There are still people (including some women) who believe that wearing revealing clothing puts a woman at risk of being raped, and that it's actually her fault if this happens.

However in some cases a controlling man may wish the woman to wear more revealing or attractive clothing when she is seen with him in public. The idea is to enhance his prestige by displaying his "property" to other men. The controller enjoys being envied, though the downside of this is that he also assumes that other men who envy him will want to take his property away from him, so his need for control will be even more desperate.

The way you speak is another behaviour that these partners will wish to control, for example by insisting that you change your accent. This is partly about symbolically separating you from your family of origin, since you inherited your accent from them. It could also be about making you feel inferior, because many people still believe that having a strong local accent means you're uneducated or even stupid. The other big targets are how you spend money and which other people you communicate with. As always, the controller will begin with small demands and work up gradually towards complete control.

By now it might have got to where you never do anything that your partner doesn't get to know about.

Does your partner know you're reading this? How bad would it be if they found out? Are you already preparing an excuse, like pretending you're researching this for a friend?

Like the living cells in your body, your personality needs a boundary to keep it from dissolving. That boundary is the privacy you have in your own mind. That is why in brain-washing situations the

victim is allowed no privacy at any time. We looked at the importance of privacy earlier when discussing the First Stage, but the removal of privacy continues progressively throughout the process.

Your personal property is a part of your privacy, an extension of yourself. That's why prisoners being interrogated or brainwashed with have all their property removed and be made to wear a uniform provided by their captors. In strict monasteries and nunneries, which are often more restrictive than a prison, the monks and nuns must also give up all property and wear uniforms. In one nunnery I heard of, the nuns were also made to move to a different bedroom at frequent intervals to reinforce the idea that the room was not "their own." This rule was enforced even though every bedroom in the nunnery was identical! Alarm bells should especially be ringing if your partner interferes with items of your property that connect you to the world outside of your relationship, such as family photographs and objects of sentimental value, like a teddy bear kept from your childhood.

At this stage the controlling partner may even try the very unpleasant technique known as "Gaslighting." Your partner shows you something you're supposed to have done- dented the car perhaps- and you don't remember doing it but you realise you must have done because they say so. If your partner is sympathetic rather than critical your resistance will be disarmed, making the technique all the more effective. For example, *"Oh you poor thing you had an accident and didn't even remember, you must be stressed out! There's so much for you to think about! So many decisions, it's too much!"* This is much more effective than *"you broke the car you stupid bitch!"* It's called "gaslighting," after the film "Gaslight" in which a man persuades his wife that she is going mad. Because this method is quite extreme it will generally not be used till this later stage of the control process. However, it might be used earlier if you already have some reason to doubt your own memory. For example, if you habitually take too much alcohol or drugs, or have some illness or injury that affects your memory.

Ask yourself, does my memory seem to have got much worse lately? Does my partner constantly have to remind me of things I've done and not remembered? Now ask yourself, does anybody else have to keep reminding you of things you have forgotten? Or does this only happen with your partner?

Shock is another method than may be used at this stage, if not earlier. The shock reaction is a kind of "bug" in the programmes of the normal human mind that makes us vulnerable to control. Think back to the last time you had a really sudden shock. I mean the kind of thing that causes that tingling, hollow, sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. You may also have felt a bit light-headed due to sudden drop in blood pressure, and your legs may have "turned to jelly," due to a sudden loss of muscle tone accompanied by trembling. But the most important symptom of a psychological shock is that in that moment your power to think and make decisions is completely paralysed. You are rooted to the spot, staring, lost for words. This reaction only lasts for a few seconds but if someone seizes the opportunity and shouts an order at you during this reaction you will generally obey,

automatically like a robot. No threat of violence is needed. Violence or the threat of violence makes people afraid, so they obey for fear of being hurt, but shock is much more powerful than fear.

Any kind of sudden surprise is enough to induce a shock reaction. How extreme this would need to be would depend on the target and their past experience. For instance if a couple habitually shout and swear a lot then using bad language won't induce any shock at all. But suppose in the middle of a calm and polite discussion the controlling partner suddenly snaps "shut the fuck up!" without any warning, this could induce a shock reaction. While his partner falls immediately silent, lost for words, he then continues calmly laying down the law. This is actually more effective than if he went on ranting and raving for a while longer, because this could trigger a more defensive reaction.

Shock is often used by stage hypnotists to induce an instant hypnotic trance. (Most stage hypnotism is just play-acting but the minority who do really hypnotise are mainly using shock inductions). Shock is also the reason why during a major incident such as a plane crash or terrorist attack the police run through the streets shouting at people to "Keep moving!" If they didn't do this, quite a lot of people would just stay rooted to the ground and might then be killed in a secondary explosion.

Think back to that description of the shock reaction. A tingling, hollow, sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach, light-headed, legs turned to jelly, rooted to the spot, staring, lost for words.

When have you experienced this recently? Was it generally when you had been arguing with your partner? Afterwards, did you immediately give in?

STAGE FOUR: THE ARTIFICIAL PERSONALITY.

Is your favourite feeling the relief which you experience when you've done exactly what your partner wanted? Does the old you before you met your partner feel like another person, a fake? Do you now look and dress and talk completely differently? Are you nowadays doing things which used to seem dangerous or disgusting to you? Are you now living somewhere far away from your family and former friends? If not, does the idea attract you? Does everyone except your partner (and perhaps his special friends) now seem completely crazy or stupid? Can you hardly believe the kind of people whom you formerly hung out with?

You may have now reached the fourth and final stage of mental enslavement, becoming transformed into an **Artificial Personality**. The controller's aim is to delete your old personality in order to replace it with another of their own design. They will create the new personality in the same way that your parents and your life experiences created your old personality while you were growing up.

The truth is that training humans is no different than training dogs. The exact same methods are effective, only the rewards are different. At first the controller will reward any behaviour that is more or less what they require. But later their demands will become more exacting. You will have to work much harder for the same reward. And by this stage you won't even resent it. You'll do anything to please your partner so you get to stay inside that bubble, you and your partner against the crazy, scary, stupid world outside.

Does all this sound scary and depressing? Well so it should! It's scary that the human mind can be twisted out of shape so easily, and depressing to think that anyone would want to do that to another person. But here's the good news. The process only works if you don't notice that it's happening. You will know when these techniques have been used on you when you notice the resulting changes in yourself.

The first thing you need to do is get away from this relationship. Hopefully it is early days and you haven't yet moved in together. But if you have, you can check the Citizens Advice website here <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/family/gender-violence/domestic-violence-and-abuse/> for more information on the practicalities of separating. (Their information covers both women and men and includes "controlling relationships" that aren't actually violent).

If there has been any threat of violence, or actual violence, you need to get out now! In 2018 in the United Kingdom, 173 people were killed in domestic violence incidents. That's more than three people every week. Three out of four victims were women, but of course that means that one in four were men. In fact nobody is exempt, whether they are male, female, or transgender, old or young, straight, bisexual, lesbian or gay men.

Controlling and abusive people are also found in all social classes and levels of education and intelligence. Many years ago I knew a man who appeared outwardly to be a gentle and rather ineffectual “hippy.” You would have thought that he would never hurt a fly. I was surprised to discover later that he had beaten up his girlfriend, then acquired a new girlfriend and beaten her up too. Both these women were strong-minded and well-educated, and would probably have described themselves as feminists. Both the women and the man were mature students at a University.

Now I know that many of you will be thinking, “yes but my partner is a good person and they have problems of their own. Surely they can change?” And yes of course they could change if they wanted to. They could learn to accept a non-controlling relationship just as you can learn how to regain control of your own self. However, of all the people in the world you are probably the least able to help them make the changes which they’d need to make.

Incidentally, nowadays there are therapy services aimed at helping men who have been physically violent to their partners, and these services may also work with men who have used non-violent psychological control. However, I have to say that when I’ve read the evidence for their success I have not been impressed. For instance, one service followed up their male clients after they had finished treatment and interviewed their female partners. But in many cases they interviewed the women with their partners present! Obviously this cannot be relied upon where there’s a history of intimidation.

Escaping a toxic relationship is much easier nowadays, but escape is still only the beginning. The relationship has changed you. That was the whole point. So you will need to find yourself again, and recreate your personality. The good news is that this won’t require an expert knowledge of psychology. You can rebuild yourself by simply reversing the same simple steps that your controller used to undermine you.

PART TWO: RECLAIMING YOUR REAL SELF.

Getting over a controlling relationship is mostly about overcoming fear. A fearful person is easy to control, because they depend upon their controller for guidance and protection. Stage one to three of the controlling process were reinforced by fear, and by conquering these fears you can regain control over your own life.

Conquering fear is actually a simple process, and all fears can be conquered in much the same way. There is no need for lengthy therapy or analysis. Suppose you wished to overcome a fear of dogs. You would ideally begin by spending time with a small dog until your fear subsided, then work your way up in stages through bigger and less predictable dogs until none of them can bother you. This same method will help you overcome the fears that put you under the control of your ex-partner.

STAGE ONE: ESCAPING THE EMOTIONAL TRAP.

To break free from the **Emotional Trap** you must overcome your fear of anything and anyone outside of the relationship with the controller. That means reconnecting with your friends and family from whom you have been separated. Now take a moment to think about this. How does it feel? The chances are that you're afraid of how they will react, after being out of contact for so long. What if they don't want to let you back into their lives? You may also have been persuaded to distrust anyone outside of your relationship, so that's the other fear that you will need to overcome.

In my experience people find that most of their old friends will accept them back into their circle. But of course in each case you won't know until you try. The longer you leave it the more difficult it will feel, especially if your friend has been through a bad time while you were out of contact. You weren't there for them, because your partner had persuaded you they didn't matter. Since you can't turn back the clock and do things differently, all you can do is apologise and ask how they are getting on. Then arrange to meet up in the near future.

You need to face the fact that some of your old friends might not want you back. That's sad but you can live with it. Most friendships last less than a lifetime in any case. We make new friends and move on as we pass through different stages of our lives. And human beings can actually deal with losses much better than many people nowadays suppose. For most of human history the death rate was much higher than today. Even young adults often died from illnesses that wouldn't even need hospital treatment nowadays. Our ancestors grieved, but they got over it. And our brains are just the same as theirs. In any case, even if you only reclaim one of your old friendships, that's still one more than your controlling partner wanted you to have!

Now take ten minutes to remember the friends and relatives with whom you were frequently in contact before your last relationship. Social media and phone and email records will help jog your memory. Make a list. Now just contact each of them by phone, text, or email. Just say "sorry I've been out of touch, how have you been keeping?" Make a promise to yourself, that you'll do this by midnight tonight.

Trust is the other thing. Your partner may have persuaded you that people in general should not be trusted, that it's "you and me against the world." Your partner was probably very convincing on this point, because they genuinely believed it themselves. People who want total control over their partner generally don't trust other human beings. And it's much easier to sell an idea if you truly believe in it yourself.

If the world feels like a scary place, you need to ask yourself one question. Did it always feel that way?

Think back to before your last relationship. How dangerous did the world seem to you then? When you were out with friends, how anxious did you use to be? Was it actually your controlling partner who "opened your eyes" to the dangers of this world?

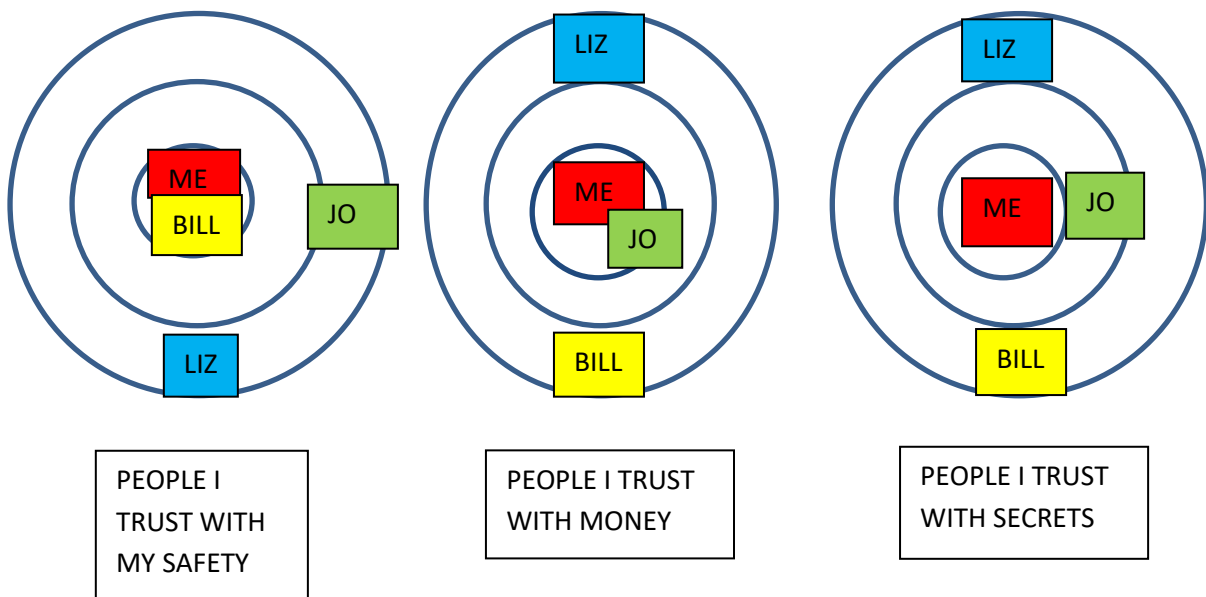
Now it may be that due to experiences in childhood the world has always seemed scary to you. This will have made you the ideal target for a controlling partner! These characters have a knack for recognising their perfect victim. As several women have described to me, "it was like I had VICTIM written on my forehead!"

If the world has always felt dangerous to you, ask yourself, "does everybody feel that way, and if not, why not?" If you don't know the answer, ask your friends for their opinion.

Of course people vary as to how easily they trust others. And obviously trusting everyone you meet would be as bad as trusting nobody at all! There are some very bad people in this world. But on the other hand, we cannot have a normal life if we do not trust anyone. Every time you use public transport or accept a lift, you are putting your life in the driver's hands, though you may not even have seen them. Even if you never trust somebody else to drive you, you have to trust the other drivers on the road to some extent. You assume that they won't suddenly swerve towards you and knock you off the road. You also trust the designers and builders of your car, and of every bridge you cross over. Likewise when walking in the street you probably don't keep your distance from other pedestrians for fear they might pull a knife and stab you. When eating, you put your trust in the farmer who produced the food, someone you have never met, perhaps living in a faraway country with a very different language and religion. You have also trusted the lorry drivers, sailors, dock workers and shopkeepers who have brought the food from the field to your kitchen. You assume that not one of these people whom you've never met has poisoned the food you are about to eat. So you can see that even people who are usually very suspicious are actually trusting dozens of strangers every day.

In my experience, when people have problems with knowing whom to trust this is generally because they see trust as a “black or white” choice. It’s as if they put everyone in two boxes, one for trusted and the other for untrusted. So either they trust someone totally, and are then devastated when the person seems to let them down, or else they trust no one and therefore feel isolated without any allies. There is a better way to think about trust, but it’s a bit more complicated.

To help you to decide how much trust, and what kind of trust, to place in each person in your life, take pen and paper and make a diagram like the one below.



You can draw as many circles as you like. For example, other circles might be for “Telling me the Truth” or “Not Forgetting Things.” In the example shown above, Bill is someone you would trust to take care of you in a dangerous place, but he cannot keep a secret and you’d rather not lend money to him. Jo always pays her debts, but in a dangerous situation she just panics. She can keep a secret so long as you tell her clearly that your life depends upon it. Liz is really not very reliable in any of these areas, but in a safe situation she’s good fun to have around.

Put any new friends in the outer circle. You can move them further in or out as you get to know them better. Give a little trust to begin with, and so long as they don’t let you down you can gradually give a little more. Remember: No one has the RIGHT to be in any particular circle. It’s entirely your choice where you decide to put them.

STAGE TWO: BURSTING THE BUBBLE WORLD.

To rediscover what's outside the **Bubble World** you must regain your interest in things outside of the relationship with the controlling partner. At this stage you've gone beyond fearing the outside world. Instead, the world now feels empty and meaningless. That's exactly how it feels for someone who has just left prison, or escaped from an extremist religious cult. But if you've never been in prison or a cult, you don't need telling that life outside those settings is much more interesting and satisfying. It's the same when someone is recovering from an addiction. The heroin addict loses all interest in anything except his or her next fix. Of course this makes them very boring company for anyone who's not another addict, so they soon lose all their non-addicted friends. So a big part of recovery is regaining the outside interests they had before they were an addict.

Whatever you were into before your relationship ate up your entire life, I suggest that you just get back into it, for a month at least. You will get back into it in the same way you first got into it. To begin with you will probably feel rusty and out-of-place. It used to be your comfort zone but now it's unfamiliar again. It will become familiar and comfortable again as you go on doing it. It really is that simple. You see, the way the human mind works is that anything at all can become our comfort zone, including things that might seem absolutely horrible at first. For example, it is well known that for some people prison is a comfort zone. As soon as they're released they commit some crime merely to get back inside.

Think back to before your relationship (social media can be a useful reminder) and recall what you previously enjoyed. Now promise yourself that you will take up that activity again as soon as possible. Get back to it within one month if it's a monthly thing, one week if it's a weekly thing, or within 24 hours if it's something you'd do every day. You may be anxious at first. But you were anxious the first time, and you got over it.

I should warn you now that there's a "programme" in your brain which I call "the excuse generator." You can come up with all sorts of excuses for delaying or doing nothing. The excuses will be totally convincing to you, because you made them! But however reasonable they feel, if they mean you don't do what you said you'd do, then they are an excuse. Promise yourself now that you'll ignore your own excuses, however reasonable they appear to be. And remember that the more intelligent you are, the more impressive will be the excuses you'll come up with.

STAGE THREE: BECOMING SOLID.

When we have melted something to a soft or liquid form, and then we take it off the heat, it will begin solidify again and we can mould it into a different shape. Your personality may have been softened and melted by losing the ability to make confident decisions. If you cannot make decisions for yourself, and rely entirely on someone else to direct you, then you don't really have a personality at all. So overcome the **Personality Meltdown** you must overcome your fear of making your own decisions about who you want to be.

Naturally you may be feeling lost and confused without your controller to tell you what to do or think. You may be constantly pestering your friends for their opinions, or becoming addicted to a therapist or psychic reader, or reading endless articles in magazines. I've even known people on very low incomes who run up phone bills of hundreds of pounds by consulting psychic phone lines, even though they know that these "psychics" have no real psychic powers! They would rather hand over their decisions to a faker who doesn't even know them, than make a decision for their self.

The fact is that whoever you consult, you are still responsible for your own actions. Your phone psychic isn't going to take the blame if things go wrong. So you need to begin to practice making small decisions without consulting anybody else. Even this may frighten you at first. For women, a new hairstyle may be a good place to start. Even if ends up looking terrible, it will grow back! The point is not the haircut. The point is to make a decision- any decision- without checking with another person. Once you have got comfortable making small decisions, move on to bigger ones. You should also start to practice keeping your own secrets. It's normal and healthy to have some thoughts and feelings that you don't share with anybody else. You've got used to constant surveillance, but the fact is you have a place inside you where only you can go. Enlarge that space!

Here's what to do when you can't make up your mind. Let's suppose it a simple choice, go out or stay in. Take a coin and decide heads for go out, tails for stay in. Now toss the coin. But here's the important bit. Do not look to see how it has fallen. Instead shut your eyes and take three long slow breaths in and out. You are about to look and see if it is heads or tails. Ask yourself, "Do I hope it will be heads or tails?" Generally you'll find you do have a preference. Now without opening your eyes, put the coin back in your pocket. If you'd hoped for heads then you go out. If you'd hoped for tails you stay in. You had already made the decision. You just didn't know it yet.

STAGE FOUR: BECOMING WHO YOU CHOOSE TO BE.

Replacing the **Artificial Self** with your **Real Self** as a free and independent person is the final and most satisfying stage. Because this is where you go further than reclaiming what your partner took away. You can rebuild yourself stronger than you ever were before, so that nobody will ever gain control over you again! That doesn't mean becoming selfish or superior or isolated. Stronger more independent people have better, more satisfying relationships with other strong characters like themselves. They are partners not subordinates. But where to begin? Who is the real you?

Generally speaking the "real you" can be anything you like. Sure, people have different talents and there may be some inborn differences in personality. However, scientists now believe that the whole idea of a fixed "personality" is overrated. Their research shows that when we behave "in character" we put this down to our personality, but when we behave "out of character" we put this down to circumstances or an outside influence. So we pay more attention to our beliefs about ourselves, than to our actual behaviour.

In any case you can have a happy and fulfilling life whatever type of personality you are. For instance, a natural introvert (like me, as it happens) can learn to mix with a huge variety of people, speak confidently in public to complete strangers, and promote themselves in a ground-breaking business, while still enjoying their own company.

The personality that was moulded by your controller was designed entirely for their benefit. But you can now recreate yourself as you see fit. This will take time, and there can never be a simple rule book to follow because one rule would only fit one type of person. The only way is to experiment. Observe the people whom you know, from close relatives to chance encounters. If you admire a certain quality that somebody has, ask yourself how did they develop that quality? Take confidence, for instance. They didn't have it when they were a baby. So how did they acquire it? And what is confidence anyway?

Take five minutes now to find your own answers to this question. Make a list of what your "confident" friend actually does that makes you think they're confident. When I ask my clients this question, they generally begin with something vague, like "she walks confidently." Yes of course, but what does that look like? Imagine you are going to give the list to someone who can't read. So each item on your list should be something you could draw a picture of. Begin with the body. How do they stand? How do they walk? What do their eyes do when they talk to somebody else? Make a picture in your mind, then draw it as a cartoon. You do not need to be an artist.

To become 25% as confident as they are, you simply need to do 25% of what they do. Begin by picking one behaviour to try out. It might be “looking directly into peoples’ eyes when I am speaking to them.”

First imagine yourself doing this new behaviour. You can do that right now. Then promise yourself that tomorrow you’ll begin doing it for real. Start small and work upwards. Try it for ten minutes first, with people who don’t know you, like in shop you don’t usually visit. Of course it will feel strange at first, because it’s not what you are used to. That will fade. But is it an interesting kind of strange? If it is, then keep practicing for longer periods.

The next stage is to move on from total strangers to acquaintances, from acquaintances to friends, from friends to best friends, and finally to family. At each stage begin with a few minutes, then practice for longer and longer periods.

You must be prepared for some resistance, especially from your family of origin (parents, brothers, and sisters). Indeed, if you don’t live near your family of origin and only visit them occasionally it’s quite likely that they will manage to ignore the changes you have made. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, humans are mentally lazy. When we meet someone we already know, it’s as if our brain calls up a file containing everything we think we know about them. If we’ve not seen them for a while then the file may be out of date. But we’re looking at the file, not the person in front of us. The second reason is that change feels threatening to many people. Think about your workplace. Many people resist almost any change in working methods, even if there are good reasons for the change and no real arguments against it. In any group of people the people fit together like the pieces in a jigsaw. They’re funny squiggly shapes, but they fit neatly. Now suppose one piece gets fed up with being squiggly and decides to become a round shape or a square. All the other pieces around her would also have to change their shape to fit with her!

How you handle this is your own choice, and you’re already learning to make choices and stick with them. By now you have proved that you are your own person, that nobody can permanently take away your power to make decisions for yourself. But this cuts both ways. You cannot force your parents, your brothers or your sisters to like the changes you have made. You are free to think as you please, but so are your family. Their freedom includes the freedom to be wrong. How you deal with this is up to you.

I hope these discussions and exercises have been useful for you. Remember that the exercises are only useful if you actually do them. I’ve kept the book quite short, firstly because some people don’t like to read a lot, and secondly because if you really do the exercises I’ve suggested, you will actually have plenty to get on with.

I wish you well as you begin re-claiming and re-creating your personality, and becoming stronger and happier than you ever were before!

