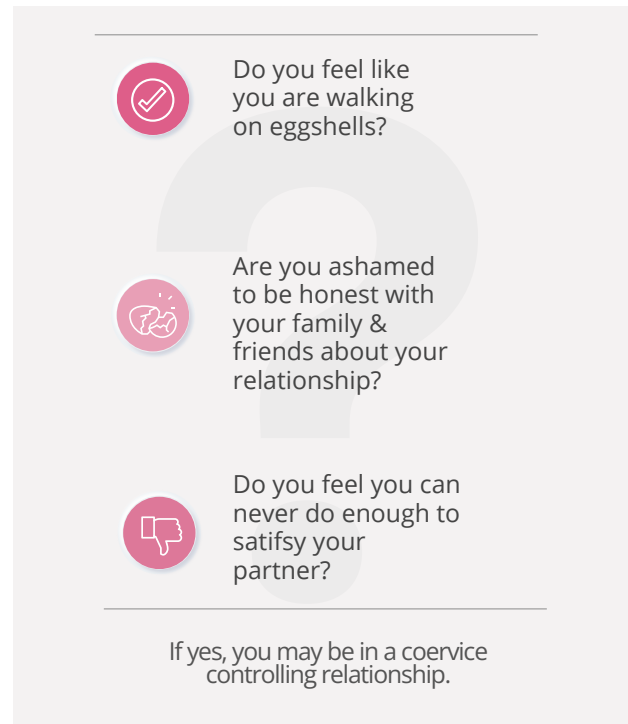


What is Coercive Control?

By Larissa Crane, LICSW, RYT

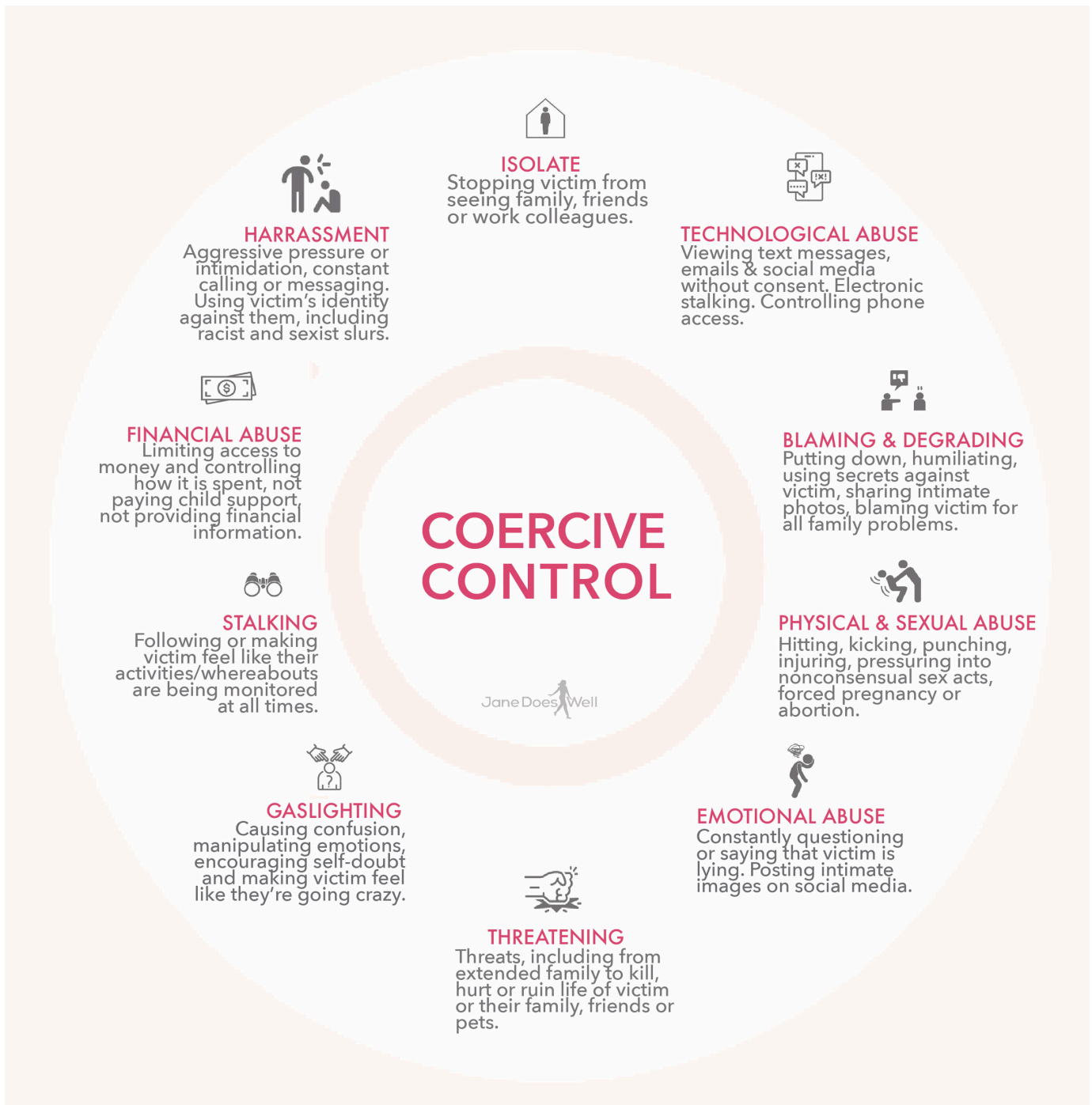
Finding a successful path through the Family Court system can be difficult for anyone. There are often additional complexities and challenges for those involved in a relationship where coercive control is an issue. In this article, we hope to provide insight into what coercive control is and how it can manifest in a relationship.

Coercive control is best defined as a pattern of abusive tactics aimed at controlling an intimate partner or family member. Many people who have been in an abusive and controlling relationship for long periods don't realize that they are, in fact, victims. But there are some common feelings associated with being coercively controlled, which the following questions (upper right) may help to identify.



Physical intimidation and abuse are commonly wielded tools in coercive control dynamics. Physical abuse can range from overt acts like pushing, hitting, and choking to more subtle tactics ranging from tripping their partner when they walk by, backing a partner into a corner and screaming at them, or pouring water over their partner.

What is Coercive Control?



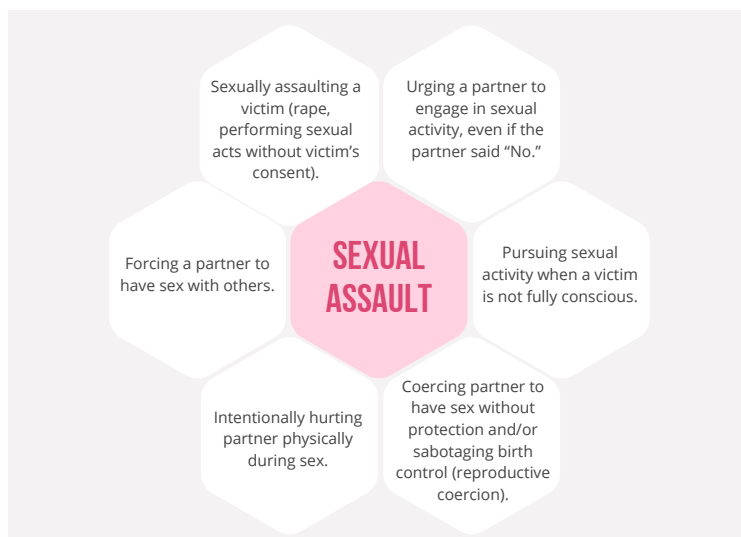
Elements of Coercive Control

Coercive controllers are often very careful not to leave physical marks, so just because there aren't physical marks doesn't mean one isn't experiencing physical abuse.

- Pushing, hitting, slapping, kicking, punching, pinching, burning, intentional tripping of partner, backing partner into a corner.
- Locking partner in a room.
- Punching a wall, throwing something violently across the room, or damaging property with intent to intimidate.
- Using or threatening to use weapons.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual violence often occurs alongside other forms of abusive behavior and typically includes physical and emotional abuse. Even in intimate relationships, consent is always required. Sexual violence is about power. Perpetrators use sexual violence to assert power over their victims.



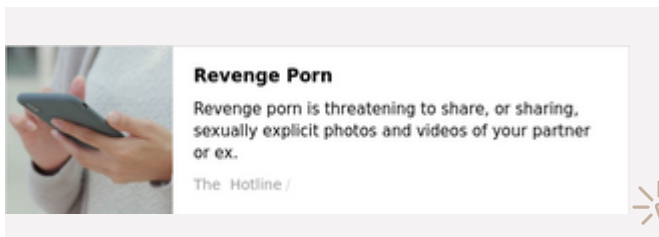
COERCIVE CONTROL IS THE FOUNDATION OF ALL FORMS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE.

*Over 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men in the U.S. experience rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Contrary to what many believe, coercive control does not always involve physical violence.

*National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV): Download the [National Statistics Domestic Violence Fact Sheet](#)

TECHNOLOGICAL & FINANCIAL ABUSE

Technological and financial abuse further entrench control. Perpetrators monitor communications, restrict access to financial resources, and manipulate economic dependencies, leaving victims feeling trapped and powerless. The following are some of the ways Technological Abuse limits the autonomy and asserts control over a victim of abuse.



“Stalking and stalkerware existed before AirTags, but Apple made it cheaper and easier than ever for abusers and attackers to track their targets,” Albert Fox Cahn, executive director at the [Surveillance Technology Oversight Project](#),

FINANCIAL ABUSE

The following are some of the ways Financial Abuse limits the autonomy and asserts control over a victim of abuse.

- ✓ Taking control of the victim's financial assets, taking their money, or limiting the victim's ability to pay for ordinary bills from marital funds.
- ✓ Refusing transparency over marital assets or income.
- ✓ Forging signatures on financial documents.
- ✓ Damaging financial behavior that harms a partner's credit score.
- ✓ Controlling behavior intended to cause a partner to lose employment.

LEGAL ABUSE

Family court is an ideal forum for abuse. Litigation facilitates control, coercion, punishment, ongoing psychological abuse harassment, and financial harm.

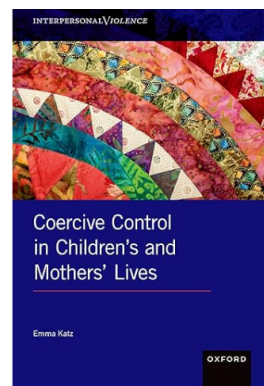
- Forces adult survivors into ongoing contact and battle.

The essence of custody litigation is attacking the other parent as a person and a parent = the perfect match for an abusive agenda.

Abusive fathers were found to be twice as likely to seek sole physical custody as non-violent fathers.

- - **APA Presidential Task Force 1996**

If the perpetrator is hell-bent on maintaining control ...they can control them through the system. For women and children, no system is as punishing or as dangerous as the family court system. -Dr. Emma Katz



Dr. Emma Katz, Ph.D., internationally-renowned expert in domestic abuse and coercive control, whose work has influenced legislation in the UK and overseas.

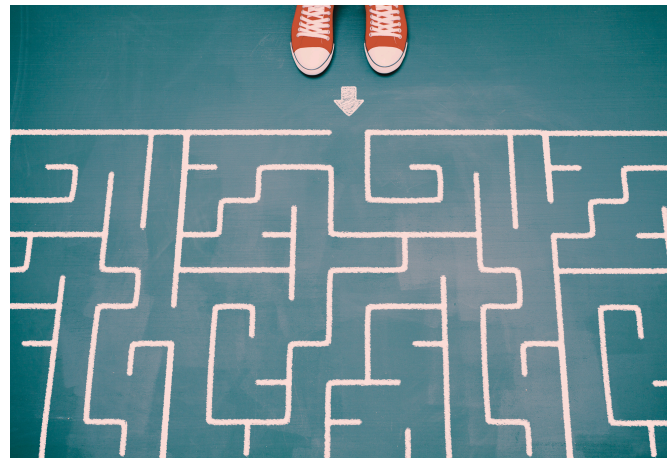


PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

The most insidious aspect of coercive control is psychological abuse. Abusers intimidate, scare, confuse, and manipulate victims. Victims endure a barrage of mind games, including gaslighting, projecting, minimizing, deflecting, and blame-shifting.

These tactics distort reality, leaving victims questioning their own sanity and diminishing their sense of worth. Many women report they prefer the physical abuse because they know the abuse will be eventually end. Abusers who engage in psychological abuse are constantly looking for ways to trick, confuse, or deceive victims.

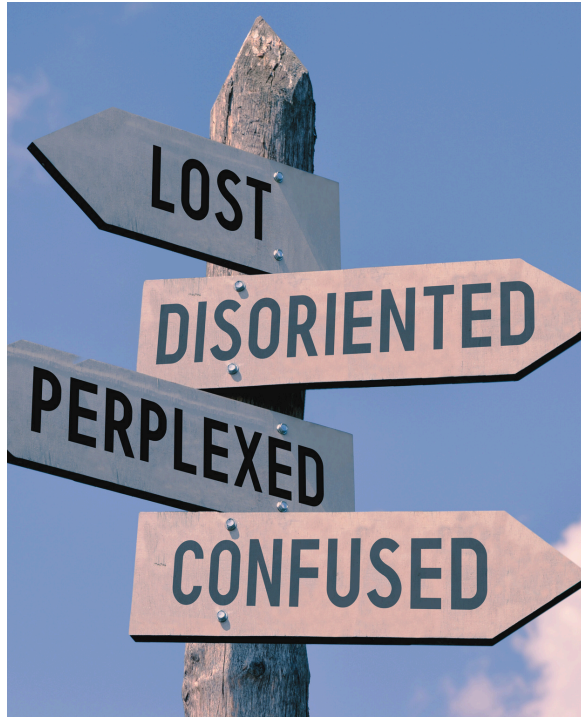
Perpetrators abuse victims emotionally with constant badgering, bullying, and stalking of the victim. Abusers use devaluing language and phrases such as “No-one will ever love you” or “You are worthless, incapable, and pathetic.” Abusers are adept at identifying and exploiting the victim's vulnerabilities and self-esteem through name-calling and demoralizing language.



Gaslighting is the ultimate hallmark of psychological abuse. Abusers deceive and lie to their partners leaving victims to question their perception of reality. Victims are made to believe they are emotionally compromised or mentally unstable, which provides the excuse to assert greater control over the victim.

Abusers play mind games by altering reality, causing confusion and doubt. When confronted with their behavior, the abuser will minimize it, often telling their victims that they are overreacting, mistaking the facts or “going crazy.”

Abusers are unable to accept responsibility for their actions or admit that they are wrong. They dismiss their victims' concerns as exaggerations or misunderstandings.



They are masters at deflecting blame and shifting it to the victim. DARVO, (the acronym for Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender) is a tactic employed by abusers to avoid taking responsibility for their actions by turning the blame onto the victim, such as “If you didn't upset me so much, I wouldn't have to hit you.” Victims are left confused and dysregulated and begin to question their sanity.


The following are tactics used by a perpetrator of Psychological Abuse.

- Denying previous statements or actions.
- Denying moving or taking items.
- Stalking and showing up unannounced repeatedly at partner's workplace or home.
- Repeatedly calling a partner's phone.
- Sending unwanted gifts, letters, texts, or emails.
- Frequently driving by or lingering near partner's home, school, or work.
- Withholding partner's access to necessary means of transportation.
- Name-calling and insults.
- Isolating victims from their support network of family and friends (“I don't want you to see Sue anymore” or “If you love me, you'd choose me, not them”).
- Trying to control what a partner wears, including clothes, makeup, and hairstyles.
- Monitoring activities with or without partner's knowledge including demanding to know where a partner goes, who they contact, and how they spend their time.
- Restricting access to food, water, medication and other basic needs.
- Threatening to physically harm themselves, their partner, pets, children, friends.
- Engaging in “smear tactics” to discredit you to other people.

From the outside, the behavior may seem harmless, but it is insidious and rampant, similar to getting a thousand paper cuts. Coercive Control is often undetectable by others and can occur in all gendered relationships.

Coercive control relationships often exist under the radar because perpetrators are highly skilled at deceit and manipulation, making them hard to detect. They are often charming and charismatic. Most abusers have narcissistic traits such as grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, and a lack of empathy. They are interpersonally exploitive and believe in their own superiority. Their greatest fear is appearing inferior or not feeling in control. Any attempts to confront their behavior often escalate the abuse.

It is important to understand that it is not the victim's fault that their partner is abusive. The victim did not do or say anything wrong and did not cause the abuse. There is rarely anything a victim can do or say to stop the harmful behavior. Abusers abuse because they see the world through a maladaptive lens and have a distorted view of how things should operate. They are not coming from a rational place.



It is important to understand that it is not the victim's fault that their partner is abusive.

Being a victim of coercive control is very isolating. Family and friends may have difficulty understanding what you are going through. They might ask a victim, "Why don't you just leave?" or "Can't you just get along and work things out?" Leaving the relationship is not that simple while dealing with the turmoil of abuse.

The effects of Coercive Control are devastating and can have lifelong consequences including:

Depression
Anxiety
PTSD
Alcohol & Substance Abuse Disorders
Suicidality
Chronic pain
Reproductive issues
Gastrointestinal/Cardiovascular Issues
Sexual/Reproductive Issues

At its core, coercive control strips victims of their fundamental rights to security, dignity, and respect. If you think you may be a victim of Coercive Control, know that you are not alone and that there are resources to support you.

If you think you are a victim of abuse and would like someone to talk to and to find out about getting help, please see our [Helpful Resources Guide](#) on the next page.

ABOUT LARISSA CRANE

Larissa Crane is a psychotherapist based in the Boston area who specializes in helping people overcome anxiety, depression, and eating disorders through a trauma-informed approach.

Her practice also supports “high conflict” litigants navigating the Massachusetts probate and family court. Larissa conducts GAL (Guardian ad Litem) reports, offers parenting coordination services, and provides counseling for those who have experienced coercive control or narcissistic abuse.

She can be reached at larissacrane.com or at cranelarissa@gmail.com.



Larissa Crane, LICSW, RYT

Helping people in the Boston area live more empowered and connected lives.



helpful resources



NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE

800.799.SAFE (7233)

TTY 1.800.787.3224

24/7 Chat option on website

Text "START" to 88788 for text option

- It will help locate a safe place if needed and come up with safety plans and what to do next.

call to action



SAFELINK | CASA MYRNA

SafeLink is Massachusetts' statewide 24/7 toll-free domestic violence hotline and a resource for anyone affected by domestic or dating violence.

1-877-785-2020 MA STATEWIDE TOLL FREE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE

call to action

CASA
MYRNA

*delivering solutions to end
domestic and dating violence*

CASA MYRNA

Largest provider of domestic violence awareness efforts and of shelter and supportive services to people who have experienced domestic violence. housing assistance and advocacy, financial literacy education and job readiness skill building and more.

call to action

helpful resources



BOSTON MEDICAL CENTER DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAM

CRisis counseling, risk assessment, safety planning, court accompaniment, help finding resources for food, housing, child care, and other necessities, help to find mental health care and legal services, & help to apply for Victim Compensation,

[learn more](#)



ASIAN TASK FORCE AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

24/7 Multilingual helpline: (617) 338-2355; Nonprofit, community organization committed to serving survivors of domestic violence representing all ages, ability levels, education levels, races, national origins, cultures, religions, gender identities, and sexual orientations.

[learn more](#)



FINEX HOUSE

Emergency shelter for survivors and their children, wheelchair accessible and a light-coded signal system for deaf survivors.

- Emergency Response, Trauma Support and Counseling
- Child Advocacy and Support Programs (CASP) and more.

[learn more](#)

helpful resources



THE SECOND STEP

Community of survivors, advocates volunteers who foster the safety, stability, and well-being of domestic violence victims. Provides comprehensive services, including safety planning, legal advocacy, counseling, peer support, transitional housing, and other essential services to adults, youth, and children in Greater Boston and MetroWest.

[learn more](#)



CENTER FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION & RECOVERY | BETH ISRAEL HOSPITAL

Safety planning, legal advocacy, referrals. access safe housing, talk about your relationship. All services and programs are private, confidential and free. Please call us at [617-667-8141](tel:617-667-8141)

[learn more](#)



HarborCOV
Communities Overcoming Violence

HARBOR COV

24-hour hotline and provides safe and affordable housing for survivors. They also provide access to legal services, case management and support for individuals and families and legal advocacy. 24-hour Hotline [617.884.9909](tel:617.884.9909) (Crisis Only)

[learn more](#)

helpful resources



VIOLENCE RECOVERY PROGRAM

Free counseling and advocacy. Specialize in services for the LGBTQIA+ community. They offer services in English and Spanish. Their services include counseling, support groups, advocacy, documentation and reporting, training and education

[learn more](#)



HAVEN | MASS GENERAL HOSPITAL

Provides welcoming, affirming advocacy services to all survivors, both in the early dating years through later life, including members of the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and queer community.

Boston Office: [617-724-0054](tel:617-724-0054)

[learn more](#)



THE NETWORK LA RED

Survivor-led, social justice organization that works to end partner abuse in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, kink, polyamorous, and queer communities.

24 HR HOTLINE: [617-742-4911](tel:617-742-4911) (voice) • [800-832-1901](tel:800-832-1901) (Toll-Free)

[learn more](#)

helpful resources



PASSAGEWAY | BRIGHAM & WOMEN'S HOSPITAL

Mission to improve the wellbeing and safety of people experiencing abuse. All services are free and confidential. They offer Safety planning individual counseling and support a safe place to talk and much more.

[learn more](#)



PORTAL TO HOPE

Emergency shelter in protective, nurturing environment free from mental, physical or sexual violence; legal aid for ensuring civil protections through the legal court system, job placement, housing assistance, helping victims rebuild their lives, both professionally and personally.


[learn more](#)

Thinking about moving away or relocating?

Talk to an experienced
legal advocate!

Relocation Counseling Project (RCP)

**NO ONE SHOULD BE ABUSED.
LET US HELP YOU MOVE AWAY FROM
DOMESTIC ABUSE SAFELY.
WE GIVE ADVICE TO HELP YOU SAFELY
RELOCATE!**

 **Call* 617-603-1557 or
toll free: 1-800-323-3205**

***Leave a message telling us when it is safe to reach you.
We will return your call within 24 hours (except weekends).**

THE RELOCATION COUNSELING PROJECT

Statewide project at Greater Boston Legal Services providing free legal advice, referrals, and counseling to victims of domestic and sexual violence, stalking, and teen dating violence.

[learn more](#)

helpful resources



TRANSITION HOUSE | CAMBRIDGE

Leader in the field in addressing domestic violence through intervention and prevention. Housing planning, safety planning, legal advocacy, court accompaniment, public benefits advocacy.

[learn more](#)



DOVE | QUINCY

24/7 hotline that offers danger assessment and safety planning, crisis intervention, supportive counseling, emergency shelter, legal advocacy and representation, community outreach, education, and training.

[learn more](#)



CIVIL LEGAL AID FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME INITIATIVE

2022 INNOVATION AWARD

CIVIC LEGAL AID FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME INITIATIVE

At Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC): Offers free civil legal aid to crime victims throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

[learn more](#)

helpful resources



GREATER BOSTON LEGAL SERVICES

GBLS attorneys and paralegals provide critical legal advice and representation to low-income individuals. Helps thousands of other poor families and individuals benefit from the systemic advocacy GBLS carries out. Works to assist victims of domestic violence obtain divorces, custody, and counseling with relocation.

[learn more](#)



WOMEN'S BAR ASSOCIATION PRO BONO PROJECTS

Works to empower domestic violence survivors by giving them a voice in their abuse prevention hearings and family law cases. We seek to prevent further abuse, homelessness, loss of child custody, and to decrease repeated court hearings.

[learn more](#)



METROWEST LEGAL SERVICES

Provides legal services to victims or survivors of domestic violence:

- Restraining Orders
- Divorce
- Custody and Visitation
- Paternity
- Child Support
- Name Change Petitions

[learn more](#)

helpful resources



NEWTON-WELLESLEY HOSPITAL DOMESTIC/SEXUAL ABUSE COUNCIL

Josephine Pang, LICSW | Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Program Coordinator Newton-Wellesley Hospital | 2014 Washington St., Newton, MA 02462 T: (617) 243-6821 | JPang1@partners.org | NWH.org. Sarah Perry Community Co-Chair

[learn more](#)



JOURNEY TO SAFETY | JEWISH FAMILY & CHILDREN'S SERVICE

Helps victims of domestic abuse and specialize in providing culturally competent and religiously sensitive services for Jewish & Russian-speaking survivors offering free and confidential assistance to all who contact us for help, regardless of their religion, culture, or country of origin. Elizabeth Schon Vainer Executive Director eschonvainer@jfcsboston.org.

[learn more](#)



LOVE LIFE NOW FOUNDATION

LOVE LIFE NOW FOUNDATION

Global awareness and education organization that supports survivors of domestic violence (DV) through year-round initiatives, as well as direct assistance to DV shelter programs.

[learn more](#)

helpful resources



REACH BEYOND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE | LATINAS KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Legal advocacy training program in collaboration with Greater Boston Legal Services. LKYR is designed to build capacity within the Waltham LatinX community, encouraging the survivors who participate to educate others and break systemic barriers that migrant and immigrant domestic violence survivors face in accessing their rights.

[learn more](#)