



Controlled Separation

Abusive behavior, in its many forms, is hurtful to relationships. Once a pattern has been established, even technically nonabusive behavior can be harmful to family members. Children who may never have been the direct target of abuse may still live in fear and apprehension about when the next outburst is going to happen. To have a good relationship and a happy, emotionally healthy family, abusive and controlling behavior must be stopped. While a commitment to being nonabusive and noncontrolling is an important step in this process, that alone will not lead to an end of all such behaviors. For people who have been abusive, such behavior is both learned and a bad habit—one that can surface without thinking or planning. Like any bad habit, it is difficult to stop all at once or with perfect success. Those early struggles, which are normal and typical even among abusive individuals who are ultimately successful in becoming nonabusive, can still cause great hardship for family members. One solution that can increase the likelihood of successful change and healing of the family is a controlled separation.

Unlike many formal separations, a controlled separation is intended to help the couple heal and reconcile. It involves temporarily separating while each person independently does what is necessary to help the relationship heal and recover. During a controlled separation, both people behave as if they are living together in a committed relationship. In other words, no dating is allowed. Finances are still managed the same way with the same expectations and responsibilities. If possible and appropriate, contact with children and friends is not restricted. The couple might still attend public events together, but may not sit together during the early stages.

A controlled separation typically starts with physical separation and little to no contact. Over time, the type, frequency, and length of contact is gradually increased until the couple is living together again—without any significant abuse or patterns of control.

Goals of a controlled separation

1. **To ensure that no further abuse occurs.** No matter how strong and firm a person's commitment is to being nonabusive, it is likely that they will still have some missteps and be abusive again, especially early on in the process. The only way to ensure that there is no more abuse is to have no contact. For example, if they have a frustrating day and yell at themselves while their partner is around, it may scare the partner. If they are living away from their partner, their partner will not be affected if they yell at themselves.
2. **To provide the abused partner immediate relief from the past abusive behavior.** Once a pattern of abuse has been established, the partner is often on eggshells, wondering when the abuse will happen again. Even technically nonabusive behaviors (walking into a room, clearing their throat, being slightly frustrated) can be experienced by the partner and/or children as abusive due to past experiences. The only way to get immediate relief from this is for the abusive partner to not be around at all. If they are around, even if they

are not being abusive, the abused partner and/or children may still feel anxious and on edge, anticipating the next abusive behavior, even if it does not come.

3. **To give the abusive partner time to learn more of the basic skills and tools.** They can practice managing themselves appropriately so that when they do have contact, it is more likely to go well. The more they are able to prepare and practice while apart from their partner, the more likely they are to do well when their partner is around.
4. **To provide the abusive partner some relief from their partner's anger and unhappiness towards them.** It is common for abused partners to feel angry and unhappy about their partner's past abusive and controlling behavior. Those feelings may actually intensify early in their recovery process. While it is important for the abused partner to feel and express those feelings, the abusive partner may not need to be the one to hear them early on. The abusive partner may not yet have the skills and mindset needed to listen well without reacting to that anger and hurt. Friends, family, therapists, and others can provide the validation and space the abused partner needs to process those feelings early on. Limited contact gives the abusive partner relief from having to deal with those feelings before they are ready to listen well.
5. **To have positive interactions.** It is easier to have positive interactions if they are relatively brief. It is hard for everyone to be on their best behavior 24/7, but limited interactions have a much greater chance of going well, which allows the relationship to improve. With continued success, interactions can gradually increase in frequency and length, and never beyond what the abusive partner can handle well.
6. **To establish a new, positive pattern to build on.** Every slip-up the abusive partner has, particularly early on, can feel to the abused partner like starting back at square one. An extended period with no abuse can increase goodwill and make it easier to handle the rarer slip that might still occur. Limited contact encourages the establishment of a positive pattern.
7. **To interrupt abusive behavior more easily.** When the abusive partner is not living with their partner, it is easier to stop an interaction before it escalates. It is easier to appropriately end a phone call, leave the premises, or ask their partner to leave. The quicker slips are interrupted, the less damage is incurred and the easier the repair.
8. **To allow the abusive partner a chance to learn to better take care of themselves.** Many abusive partners tend to be overly dependent upon their romantic partner, family, and work for support. They may have a limited network of good friends and make little time for themselves beyond working and spending time with their family. A controlled separation creates the opportunity for them to learn to do a better job of walking on their own two emotional feet. They have extra time on their hands while they are not with their family. They have more time to nurture friendships and pursue other long-neglected interests without taking away from their family. Abusive partners who diversify their sources of emotional support tend to be better partners and parents because they are not as heavily dependent upon their family.
9. **To give each person a chance to get perspective.** When there has been significant abusive and controlling behavior in the past, it is common for one or both people to question whether the relationship can go on. Abusive partners often fear that a controlled separation will lead to a permanent end to the relationship. However, it is very rarely the controlled separation that causes the relationship to end. Instead, that time apart allows each person space to gain further clarity on whether they can happily remain in the

relationship if the abusive behavior stops. Those relationships that end anyway were usually damaged beyond repair from the abuse and/or for other reasons. On the other hand, the time apart—especially if it results in the end of most of the abuse and control—may make it even clearer to both parties that they wish to remain together. This time apart can help reinforce their conviction that they do not want to permanently break up. It can actually deepen the commitment each has to the relationship.

Structure of a controlled separation

A controlled separation starts with little to no contact. The amount of contact is gradually increased, but not so fast that things start to go poorly. The frequency and pace of contact is solely determined by the abused partner. An early test of whether the abusive partner is serious about changing their behavior is whether they can be respectful of the limits that are set, even if they do not like them.

Discussions of high conflict and difficult issues in the relationship should be postponed as long as possible during the controlled separation. Tabling these issues until there is no longer a pattern of abuse and control increases the likelihood of them being effectively resolved. There is also a much lower chance of abuse and control occurring if these issues are not discussed until there have been significant improvements in the abusive partner's behavior.

Below is an example of a gradual increase in contact. This exact progression does not have to be followed, nor does it need to start at the very beginning. Each abused partner determines their own pace.

1. No contact at all except for emails or texts initiated by the abused partner. The abusive partner is only to respond to direct questions.
2. Texting—initiated by the abused partner
3. Limited phone contact—initiated by the abused partner
4. Emails, texting, and brief phone calls—initiated by either person
5. Dates in public settings
6. More extended phone calls
7. Brief visits in the home
8. More extended visits in the home
9. Overnights at home
10. Weekends at home
11. Moving back into the home

The level of contact should only be increased by the abused partner at a pace with which they feel comfortable. Ideally, if the rate of contact is paced correctly, there will be few to no abusive outbursts. If there is an abusive outburst, the abused partner can consider whether to decrease contact again or simply delay increasing contact until the partner can consistently handle themselves appropriately. Sustained positive interactions are a reason to increase the level of contact.

While a controlled separation can be difficult in the short run due to loneliness, financial stress, and decreased support, it can have many long-term benefits. When it goes well, it significantly reduces abusive episodes and gives the abusive partner an opportunity to consistently manage their behavior. A stretch of many months that are relatively free of abuse relieves the pressure on the relationship and can allow for a rekindling of goodwill that can lead to reconciliation. In a successful controlled separation, the abused partner experiences significant healing and a gradual return of trust, and the abusive partner experiences sustained success at being nonabusive and appropriately managing themselves. As a way to limit further damage and promote quicker healing, it is worth serious consideration.

Excerpted from *Becoming Allies . . . With Your Partner, Yourself, and Others: Addressing the Abuse and Control in Your Relationships* by Chris Huffine