

# From Romance to Isolation: Understanding Grooming

Anyone can fall for the clever manipulations of an abusive partner

By Lisa Aronson Fontes, PhD

Feb 11, 2019

 [Print Article](#)  Share

Find help for domestic violence faster and easier.  
At [DomesticShelters.org](http://DomesticShelters.org)



Most relationships that become violent or controlling do not start that way. Rather, they often begin with a heavy dose of romance. Abusers often shower their future victims with attention, flattery and care. The abuser may initially seem ideal—devoted, loving, supportive, and wanting to spend every minute with their new partner. This flood of romance can feel overpoweringly positive, leaving the recipient in an altered state where reality may seem suspended. This is a type of grooming, a predatory tactic that is meant to build a deep emotional connection. Abusers know exactly what they are doing.

Just like an ocean wave, the romantic outpouring may make the recipient a bit unsteady and unable to see the new relationship clearly and can lead a victim to overlook or dismiss the onset of abusive behaviors.

## Abusers Often Come on Strong

Sara was just 22 when she met 30-year-old Sam. Within two weeks, he had moved into her apartment, put his name on her bank account and claimed her every second when she was not at her job. Sam asked about her most intimate experiences, secrets, and dreams. Sam accompanied Sara whenever she went out.

At first Sara was elated—no man had ever loved her this intensely. He took her phone from her when they were together so they could concentrate on each other. He pushed her to skip events at work and with friends saying their relationship was their priority. He made exciting alternative plans for the holidays so she missed family gatherings.

notes

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

NEW

--	--	--	--	--	--	--



Sam asked Sara for access to all her social media accounts as a “sign of trust.” When Sara voiced any objection, Sam accused her of lacking commitment and became sullen. He classified all her attempts at privacy or independence as signs that she did not love him. Sara gave in—it was easier than fighting—and she desperately wanted to preserve the “purity” of their love. Sam had groomed Sara into isolation, and isolation made her vulnerable to further coercive control.

## Intimidation Is Next

Romantic gestures can abruptly turn into intimidation. Abusers typically blame their partners for growing tensions. Victims will work hard to appease the abuser, trying to keep themselves safe and get back to the early glow.

After a romantic dinner one day, Steve began kissing and taking off the clothes of his boyfriend, Derek. Derek kissed him back but said he did not want to have sex that night. Steve grabbed him hard by both arms, stared into his face and said, “Don’t.” For the first time, Derek felt afraid of Steve, who was bigger and stronger than he was. In that moment, Derek understood that saying “no” to sex was not really an option.

To keep the peace, Derek never again directly refused to do what Steve asked of him sexually. Derek felt threatened throughout the remainder of their relationship but tried to avoid thinking about these feelings because the romance was sweeter than any he had ever known before.

From initially making their partners feel loved unconditionally and like they can do no wrong, abusers then make their partners work hard to please them, blaming and acting hostile when they do not get their way.

## Grooming the Community

Abusers often groom friends, family and others to overlook signs of abuse and cut ties with the victim. Abusers strategically act charming and helpful to others so that these individuals cannot

▼ imagine the cruel acts occurring behind closed doors.

Sometimes abusers groom the community by ruining their partner's reputation. This can be overt, or quite subtle.

- Leticia said she lost her friends soon after getting together with her husband, “because of the stories he made up or twisted to make me sound incompetent, lazy, and crazy.”
- Mike called Lisa's friends and asked them to let him know if she did anything peculiar, subtly indicating that he was worried that she was becoming “unhinged.” She noticed certain friends looking at her strangely, but did not know why. The unexplained change in her friends' behavior undermined her confidence.
- Jacob told members of their tightknit religious community that Hannah was behaving immodestly and neglecting their children. When she tried to leave him, her community shunned her and fought on behalf of her husband's bid for child custody.

Awareness of the grooming process helps us understand the plight of someone in a relationship with an abuser. Grooming helps explain why the person may stay with the abuser, submit to his or her demands or push away others who try to help. Cassandra Wiener, a coercive control researcher, entreats readers to understand how this grooming process can break down survivors. She explains that survivors of domestic violence and coercive control “are vulnerable, but not because they are weak, character-deficient or mentally unwell. They are vulnerable because they have been groomed.”

If you are concerned that you or someone you care about has been groomed for an abusive relationship, the following can help:

- Learn about coercive control
- Complete an inventory of the abusive partner's control
- Avoid isolation by staying connected to friends and/or relatives. Remember that the abuser may be monitoring all of his partner's contacts, so keep these conversations light and generally supportive, unless you are certain you have privacy;
- If safe, establish boundaries and cautiously test the limits of the control. That is, in the grooming stage, the abuser may “ask” his partner to stay away from a social event without making it seem like a demand. If the partner refuses to cede to the abuser's wishes and the abuser then becomes hostile, the abuser has made it clear that this “request” is really a demand. Pushing to maintain some privacy and autonomy may make evident the controlling motivations behind the “romance.” Even within a controlling relationship, the abused partner may be able to set some boundaries and resist isolation.



*Editor's Note: Lisa Aronson Fontes, PhD, is a senior lecturer at the University of Massachusetts and author of Invisible Chains: Overcoming Coercive Control in Your Intimate Relationship. All survivor names have been changed to protect privacy.*

