



friends and classmates. People can also use sexual coercion with dating partners and spouses. Specifically regarding sexual coercion in intimate relationships—dating partners and spouses—researchers say there are eight basic ways people coerce partners into unwanted sex:

- **Exploitation:** Using some form of deception or exploitation to obtain sex, such as falsely claiming to be in love with the target, or pushing alcohol to lessen their ability to refuse sex.
- **Bullying:** Insulting or calling the target names to get sex, such as accusing them of being “uptight,” a “prude,” a “cock-tease” or a bad lover.
- **Pressure:** Using arguments, nagging, begging, and sheer persistence to push the other person to have sex. The target may give in simply because the abuser does not give up.
- **Relational Threats or Manipulation:** Threatening to end the relationship or seek another sexual partner if the target does not comply with their sexual wishes. Accusing the target of being a “bad girlfriend” or “bad spouse” falls into this category.
- **Humiliation/Intimidation:** Screaming, shouting, making a scene and degrading the target to make them comply, for instance by telling them that they are “disgusting” and don’t know how to do X sex act, anyway. “No one in their right mind would want to touch you,” would be a form of humiliation. Punching walls and throwing or breaking objects are forms of intimidation.
- **Inducing Helplessness:** Helplessness occurs when someone has learned through experience that they are unable to refuse sex, because their partner simply ignores their efforts to say, “no,” or physically overpowers them. Targets who have been made to feel helpless may not overtly object to particular acts on particular days because they have learned that they cannot resist effectively.
- **Inducing Hopelessness:** Communicating to a target that the effects of refusing to have sex are worse than complying. For instance, an abuser might give his partner the silent treatment, act cold or mean, or mistreat pets or children if the target does not comply sexually.
- **Physical Harm/Threats of Physical Force:** when physical threats and abuse appear at times other than during the sexual encounter, targets still know they will put themselves at risk if they do not submit to sex.

Abusers often use more than one of these sexual coercion tactics combined with other weapons of coercive control such as isolation, mind control, manipulation, micro-management, and physical abuse. Altogether, these create a toxic relationship that erodes the victim’s autonomy and sense of self. Over time, the target has learned that it is “easier” to give in and “get it over with” than to try to resist sex.



call it an assault because they gave in, froze, or maybe even offered sex to avoid a negative outcome.

For instance, a victim may initiate vaginal sex, hoping to control the encounter and avoid other sexual activities that she finds distasteful or painful. Because she typically does not protest every single time, she may feel like a “willing victim.” She may believe she is at least partially responsible for the sexual encounter.

The sexual coercion may not concern simply if or when a couple has sex, it may also concern the sexual acts performed:

Simone did not like to be penetrated anally by her husband. But he insisted that if she did not let him do it to her at least once a month, he would find someone else to do it with. On occasion, he also penetrated her anally without her consent. (This is rape, although Simone did not think of it that way). Simone decided that it would be safest for her to agree to monthly anal sex, even though she did not want to, because in this way she could at least use lubrication and prepare herself psychologically. (She later found out that even though she was meeting her husband’s demand for anal sex, he was still secretly having sex with other women. His desire for other partners had nothing to do with what she would or not do with him, despite his claims).

### There Is Help

If you are a victim of sexual coercion in an intimate relationship, the options that are open to you depend on your ability to speak with your partner safely, and your partner’s willingness to respond supportively and change their ways. You may already have an idea about how this is likely to go—you have probably tried it before. Speaking openly about something that has been swept under the rug could put you at new risk, depending on the relationship. Your first step should be to contact a domestic violence agency, speak with an advocate, and develop a safety plan. If you keep complying silently with sex that you do not want, your resentment and suffering will increase. You may or may not decide to contact the legal system and you may or may not decide to leave. Speaking with an advocate will help you understand your options, and assess the risks involved in each.

