



**Control Issues**

Control—exerting influence over one’s environment or the actions or behaviors of another person—is sometimes used excessively by those who fear the unpredictable and ambiguous, feel they need to prove themselves, or fear losing control. The incessant need for control can be overwhelming and exhausting, wreaking havoc on relationships, careers, and overall quality of life.

Control is typically a reaction to the fear of losing control. People who struggle with the need to be in control often fear being at the mercy of others, this fear may stem from traumatic events that left them feeling helpless and vulnerable. As a result, they may crave control in disproportionate and unhealthy ways. The experience of abuse or neglect, for example, can make people look for ways to regain control of their lives.

The need for control drives people to turn to the external world in order to find things they can control. They may be compelled to micromanage and orchestrate the actions and behaviors of others, or maintain rigid rules regarding routine, diet, or cleanliness and order. For instance, people who are physically or psychologically abusive inflict pain on loved ones in the form of ridicule, isolation, restrictions, or physical or sexual assault, because they themselves are in pain, though this pain is often deeply buried and unacknowledged.

Traumatic or abusive life experiences  
A lack of trust  
Anxiety  
Fears of abandonment  
Low or damaged self-esteem

A person's beliefs, values, and faith  
Perfectionism and the fear of failure  
Emotional sensitivity  
Fear of experiencing painful emotions

**Symptoms and Types of Control Issues**

**Examples of exerting control over others:**

Micromanagement  
Keeping a person from seeing or talking to loved ones or friends  
Dishonesty

Over-protective or helicopter parenting  
Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or bullying  
Withholding affection or sexual intimacy

**Examples of controlling self or environment:**

Disordered eating  
Compulsive exercising  
Self-harm

Substance abuse  
Compulsive arranging, tidying, or cleaning  
Building emotional walls

Someone who struggles with a need for control may experience shame, anxiety, stress and depression. Addressing control issues involves unraveling the source of the need for control. The client and therapist work together to address the underlying fear, emotions, or anxiety, and develop coping strategies. This process of increasing self-awareness can help a person begin relinquishing the need for control.

Therapy can help a person identify the self-protective nature of the need for control. Perhaps the person’s parents were absent or emotionally unavailable in childhood, or maybe her childhood home was not a place of stability. Emotional or physical instability and a lack of choices or autonomy can lead a person to seek control over other aspects of life. Recognizing and addressing this source of distress can help.