

## My boyfriend is getting controlling and raised his fist to me

### ▶ DEAR JOE

I have been with my boyfriend for the past nine months or so. The beginning was great, we hit it off well and everything looked promising, but in the last few months he's changed and has become really critical of me. He puts me down in front of friends, when I tell him I don't like it he tells me I am just imagining things and being too sensitive. When we make plans he's often late or doesn't even show, and if I complain he tells me he is upset that I do the same thing - which isn't true. Lately he has been accusing me of being on Grindr and hooking up with other guys, which is absolutely not true. Things came to a head last week when he grabbed my phone from me after I received a text. I tried to grab it back but he shoved me and showed me his fist in anger while shouting at me. He didn't hit me but it terrified me. I get on with him like no one else when things are good but I feel bullied by him. What should I do?

MATTY, ROCHESTER

### ▶ HI MATTY

Everyone's relationships are good in the beginning, so that is not surprising: Anyone can put their best foot forward and showing their best face. That is the easy part. It's not an indication of who that person truly is.

I don't like the warning signs that I am seeing in your story. In my opinion you are with an emotionally - and potentially physically - abusive guy. He doesn't sound like he feels accountable for his behaviour at all and you are taking on most - if not all - of the blame for them.

Emotional manipulation is when a partner turns what you say about him back onto you. Your boyfriend does this when you tell him you don't like how he treats you in front of your friends, him blaming you for being "too sensitive" rather than taking responsibility for his own actions. He is the one who is late for events and denies it and turns it around on you. These are very bad signs.

Perhaps the most troubling fact is that he raised a fist to you. This is a major red flag and danger sign. I recommend you get individual therapy immediately or go to a Domestic Violence Shelter. While he has not hit you yet, he is undoubtedly on the continuum of what power, control and emotional abuse look like.

He is engaging in what we call in the field of psychotherapy, 'Gaslighting'.

Gaslighting was originally a stage play transformed into a movie in which a man attempts to make a woman go crazy by denying her reality and manipulating her environment. She notices things are different but he denies they are in order to prompt her toward insanity so that he can marry her and take all of her money. Gaslighting is a form of mental abuse in which information is twisted, spun and selectively omitted to favour the abuser, or false information is presented with the intent of making victims doubt their own instincts, memories and perceptions. The whole goal is to cause disorientation and to make them question their own reality.

There is also a possibility he has Narcissist Personality Disorder (NPD). A person with NPD has an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for attention and admiration, and a strong sense of entitlement. They believe they are superior and have little regard for the feelings of others. The narcissist views people as objects and possessions which can feed their needs. Narcissistic abuse is insidious because the abuse is covert, cunning and indirect.

There are signs in your boyfriend's behaviour of ownership and entitlement. Abusive men may feel justified in the abusive behaviour because they have a sense of entitlement or ownership over their partner. Him taking your phone without asking shows signs of his entitlement,



that he can take whatever he wants from you. You had every right to have an immediate reaction and him showing you a fist means only one thing, and that is that eventually he is going to hit you.

All of these things are signs of what we call 'grooming', where a perpetrator starts out with small verbal assaults and 'mind fucks' his victim by turning the accountability of problems and conflicts onto their partner and then threatens to harm, but doesn't until the day comes that he does physically abuse his partner.

Sometimes people get themselves involved with these people because they have their own histories of being treated this way either by adults from their childhood or from past partners which had similar issues that were unresolved. Is this true for you? If so, now is the time to break the cycle and get some help.

It is also common for people to end these relationships but then go back because the partner makes them feel guilty and crazy, making them believe that nothing was wrong in the relationship. Sometimes the breakups and makeups occur a number of times before the victim finally finds the nerve to completely end the relationship.

You need to decide what your boundaries are. In other words, how much worse do the signs need to get before you really do leave? What would it take for him to go against a value that you hold dear that would be the last straw? Knowing this is important so that you recognise that you *do* have limits and that you *won't* tolerate something in particular. Some people decide that last straw is if he comes after the children, if he breaks a bone, puts you at risk for HIV and more. Then the decision is easier for them.

Even if he never lays a hand on you, what he is doing to you emotionally and psychologically is enough to be called domestic violence. It is worse to be emotionally abused because the bruises remain invisible and no one can see them, not even you.

What are your bottom lines?



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