

'Boundaries' or coercive control? Experts explain how to tell the difference

July 19 2023, by Linda Dubrow-Marshall and Rod Dubrow-Marshall



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In a series of Instagram Stories shared on July 9, professional surfer and law student Sarah Brady, made comments on her past relationship with actor Jonah Hill. She labeled him a "misogynistic narcissist" and accused

him of "emotional abuse." To make her case, she shared [a series of screenshots](#) allegedly showing texts Hill sent to her during their relationship.

Emotional abuse was incorporated into the [Serious Crime Act](#) in 2015 and the [Domestic Abuse Act](#) in 2021. These landmark laws criminalized coercive and controlling behavior in England and Wales. They have also sparked a growing awareness of what constitutes an "unhealthy" versus a "healthy" relationship.

According to the texts shared by Brady, Hill had a series of prohibitions for her behavior during their relationship. He described these as his "boundaries." They included surfing with men, modeling posing pictures of herself in a bathing suit, posting "sexual pictures" and having friendships with "unstable" women.

There are several potential problems with this list of banned activities, especially for someone who makes their living as a professional surfer. The terms "sexual pictures" and "unstable" are also not clearly defined, so may have been subject to the judgment of Hill who allegedly created this list of "requirements" for their relationship.

Hill has not publicly responded to the allegations and his publicist did not respond to our request for comment.

Were Jonah Hill's 'boundaries' a form of coercive control?

It could be argued that these required "boundaries" fall under one of the examples of controlling or coercive behavior outlined in the UK Domestic Abuse Act.

"Controlling or monitoring the victim's daily activities and behavior, including making them account for their time, dictating what they can wear, what and when they can eat, when and where they may sleep."

In her book "[Where to Draw the Line: How to Set Healthy Boundaries Every Day](#)," psychotherapist Anne Katherine defines boundaries as: "A limit that promotes integrity" with the purpose of "protecting every treasured aspect of your life." It's hard to argue that Hill's alleged list fits within these terms.

The breakthrough features of the Serious Crime Act and the Domestic Abuse Act were in recognizing that psychological and emotional abuse can alone constitute possible criminal behavior.

The crime of controlling or coercive behavior does not have to be accompanied by [physical violence](#) and instead a pattern of psychological control can be enough for a prosecution. Such a pattern transcends any single incident which viewed on its own and out of context might not capture the full nature and impact of the coercive control.

There is inadequate information to assess the relationship of Hill and Brady or to comment on whether he was behaving like a "misogynistic narcissist" as Brady alleges. The publicity around this case can, however, hopefully usefully contribute to considerations of what constitutes healthy relationships, how to set healthy boundaries and avoid coercive and controlling behavior in relationships.

What counts as psychological abuse

Psychological or emotional abuse (as defined in the Domestic Abuse Act) can include:

- manipulating a person's anxieties or beliefs or abusing a position

of trust

- hostile behaviors or silent treatment as part of a pattern of behavior to make the victim feel fearful
- being insulted, including in front of others. This includes undermining an person's ability to parent or ability to work
- keeping a victim awake
- using violence or threats towards pets to intimidate the victim and cause distress
- threatening to harm third parties
- using social media sites to intimidate the victim
- persuading a victim to doubt their own sanity (known as "gaslighting").

These are clearly "red flags" for [psychological abuse](#), so if someone is experiencing them, they would be well advised to read the rest of the [statutory guidance](#) for the Domestic Abuse Act and to seek help from others. Isolation, in particular, is a key feature in [maintaining coercive control](#).

The [Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs](#) (an initiative based in the US that works toward ending violence against women) created the widely used Duluth Power and Control Wheel model to describe coercive relationships. The contrasting Equality Wheel describes positive healthy relationships.

These contrasting models compare the use of [emotional abuse](#) versus respect. They weigh up factors such as male privilege versus shared responsibility and using coercion and threats versus negotiation and fairness. The latter is described as: "seeking mutually satisfying resolutions to conflict, accepting change, and being willing to compromise."

Conflict between couples is inevitable and can be healthy. But the willingness to work toward finding mutually satisfying resolutions to conflict lays the foundation for a healthy relationship. The willingness to compromise hints at the acceptability of sometimes "giving in" for the sake of the relationship. Especially if it does not violate the person's boundaries in the sense of compromising their sense of personal or individual integrity—as Brady appears to be arguing was the case in her relationship with Hill.

People who are experiencing coercive control may not identify with how it is described. For this reason, [family members](#) and friends can be of immense help in providing feedback in a gentle, supportive and non-confrontational manner. They can also refer loved ones to domestic [abuse](#) charities and mental health professionals.

Recognizing how healthy boundaries in a [relationship](#) can cross the line into coercion and control can be difficult. But the law on controlling and coercive behavior provides a good guide to help spot when that line has been crossed.

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