Reflective Case Study

Technology Facilitated Coercive Control educational activity

Use the following scenario as an educational activity with your team. Read the case studies then refer to Division 6A and section 54D of the Crimes Act 1900. Think about whether the offence could apply, examine the parts of the act that relate to the action and intent. What practical interventions may be available at different stages if Lisa was your client? How would you encourage Lisa to make a record of the coercive control Mark has chosen to use, and its impact on Lisa and her child?

Case Study: Lisa

Lisa, a 42-year-old single mother, entered a relationship with Mark three years ago. Initially, Mark was charming and attentive, making Lisa feel valued and loved. However, as the relationship progressed, his behaviour became increasingly controlling and manipulative.

After their first year of dating, Mark began monitoring Lisa's communication. He would frequently check her text messages and social media accounts, often using the information he found to instigate arguments. For example, if Lisa received a message from a male friend, Mark would accuse her of being disloyal or suggest that she was seeking attention from other men. This eroded Lisa's self-esteem and made her feel isolated from her support network.

To further manipulate Lisa, Mark would use emotional tactics based on the information he gathered. For instance, if Lisa expressed a desire to spend time with friends or pursue hobbies, Mark would twist her words, suggesting that she was abandoning him or that her interests were more important than their relationship. He would often sulk or give her the silent treatment, making her feel guilty for wanting to have a life outside of their relationship. He would also belittle Lisa in front of others, making derogatory comments about her parenting skills and appearance.

Mark's controlling behaviour extended to social interactions as well. He would discourage Lisa from spending time with family and friends, often claiming that they were a bad influence or that they didn't truly care about her. This isolation further deepened Lisa's dependence on Mark, as she felt she had no one to turn to for support.

Sometime during the relationship Mark also took control of their finances. He would manage Lisa's finances through shared banking apps, which allowed him to track her spending in real-time. He would criticise her purchases, labelling them as frivolous or irresponsible, and would often restrict her access to funds, leaving her feeling financially dependent on him. Lisa found it increasingly difficult to make even small purchases without Mark's approval, leading to feelings of helplessness and frustration.

Mark's abusive behaviour escalated as he employed various technological means to exert control over Lisa's life. He installed tracking software on her phone without her knowledge, allowing him to always monitor her location. Sometimes when Lisa was at home alone, their electric vacuum cleaner would undock itself and seem to follow her into different rooms. Their smart fridge would also randomly start playing music like the song 'Every Breath You Take' on repeat. When she mentioned to Mark that something might be wrong with them, he pretended to take a look at them but came back and said "they are working fine, it's all in your head, love". Other times, after Lisa had been out Mark would often confront her about her whereabouts, using the information he gathered to create a narrative that she was untrustworthy or hiding things from him. This constant surveillance made Lisa feel trapped and anxious, as she was unable to go anywhere without Mark knowing.

As time went on, Lisa became increasingly aware of the toxic nature of her relationship with Mark. The combination of emotional manipulation, financial control, and surveillance left her feeling trapped and powerless. Recognising the need for change, Lisa began to carefully explore options for seeking help and reclaiming her independence.

One day while out shopping for groceries and other errands, one of the few things she was still able to do each week, Lisa ran into a friend from her son's soccer team. She was able to use their phone and contact a local domestic violence support service. After describing her suspicions of being tracked and always feeling on edge, they arranged a technology sweep at a time when Mark was going to be away for a few days.

During the sweep of the house, several hidden recording devices and small cameras were found. Two GPS tracking devices were also found in her car. A digital technology assessment also located the hidden spyware on Lisa's phone.

These combined behaviours created an atmosphere of fear, making Lisa feel unsafe in her own home while also feeling trapped and unable to carry out day-to-day activities outside.

Case study references:

Adapted from - Eaton, A. A. (2020). Nonconsensual porn as a form of intimate partner violence: Using the power and control wheel to understand nonconsensual porn perpetration in intimate relationships. Trauma, violence, & abuse, 22(5), 1140–1154. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020906533