Educational Case study for exploring Coercive Control and the LGBTQ+ Community

Use this scenario as an educational activity with your team. Read the case study then refer to Division 6A and section 54D of the Crimes Act 1900. Think about whether and how the offence could apply in this scenario.

- What practical interventions may be available at different stages?
- What service or referrals could best meet Toby's needs?
- What could you and your colleagues do to help make this a safe and accepting organisation for Toby to seek assistance from and be supported?

Case study 1: Toby and James

Toby and James are two gay cisgendered males who have been in a relationship for two years.

Toby attended religious schools growing up and has parents who are deeply religious so has never felt safe or able to speak openly about his sexuality. His parents still believe James is a friend from university and that they are just housemates who split rent and work near each other in Sydney.

Early in the relationship, Toby told James about his difficulties coming out which James respected. While growing up Toby had heard his parents speak about queer people needing to be subjected to conversion therapy or have it 'beaten out of them' and he had disclosed this to James before. In their day to day lives they are openly 'out' with their small group of friends and regularly attended dinners, concerts and other events as a couple.

Looking good is important to James, and after about a year he started making comments about Toby's weight and suggesting he should change outfits because he looks 'too fat' or 'too femme'. Over time, these comments wore down Toby's confidence. Determined to make James happy, Toby joined a gym and lost weight over a few months. Excited to show his progress, Toby bought some new clothes and waited until James was home one night so he could do a reveal of his new look. James' reaction was not as expected. He accused Toby of being interested in one of their mutual friends, Aiden, and said Toby now looks 'butch'. James denied ever making the comments about Toby being 'fat' or looking 'femme'.

After a fight and Toby trying to convince James he wasn't interested in anyone else, James said he should 'prove it' by letting him check Toby's messages and joining their bank accounts so they could save to buy a house together, which Toby did. Despite this show of commitment, James became increasingly jealous and possessive of Toby. Whenever Toby would make plans without him, James would be in a bad mood for days and accuse Toby of sneaking behind James' back to 'get with Aiden' and then refused to talk to Toby when they were both home. Despite giving Toby the silent treatment at home, whenever Toby was out, James would constantly phone and message him wanting to know when he'll come home, even while Toby was at work. The last time Toby went out for a drink with work colleagues, James flew into a rage, accused Toby of being unfaithful and demanded a full breakdown of everything he had spent.

The possessiveness got worse, and James started to demand Toby would work from home all the time. On days where Toby was due to go into the office, James would sometimes take his house and car keys. This left Toby unable to leave their house and having to make up reasons to his boss why he couldn't make it into the office on time, which would jeopardise his employment. Toby stopped going out to work and social events because he was scared of how James would react, even though he was missing the company of his friends and colleagues.

One day, Toby was checking their bills had been paid when he noticed half of the money from their joint account was missing. When he brought this up with James, he was surprisingly open and said he had taken the money out and put it into his own account as he was suspicious of Toby being unfaithful. Their rent, electricity, internet, subscriptions, food and other expenses continued being taken from the joint account and was gradually reducing any money Toby could access.

Over several months, Toby pleaded for James to believe there was nothing else going on. Toby eventually got tired of the same argument and threatened to move out. This triggered James into a rage where he threatened to 'out' Toby by uploading photos of them as a couple kissing and holding hands. He also threatened to tell Toby's parents about their joint account, so it was clear they were in a relationship. Toby knew his family would react negatively to finding out he was gay. Being afraid of losing any family connection, Toby decided to stay and calm James down by acting exactly how he wanted.

To make James happy, Toby tried to fulfill his sexual fantasies, but James wanted to push beyond what Toby was comfortable with. It all became too much when James tried to tie Toby up with ropes. Toby lashed out and pushed James off him to free himself, James stumbled and bumped his head on a cabinet causing an immediate facial bruise. To exert further control, James threatened to call the cops and said, "you're bigger than me so the Police will think you bashed me." James threatened to tell their friends that Toby had been abusing him for ages and that Toby would have nobody left if he left the relationship.

Case Study reference: Adapted from the Commonwealth Attorney General's Factsheet: Understanding how coercive control can affect LGBTQIA+ people.