

Are you a Controller? Sure!

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Probably about 70% of couples I see have controlling as a problem. What is it? How does it work? What can you do about it? In this article I will try to answer those questions and share solutions with you.

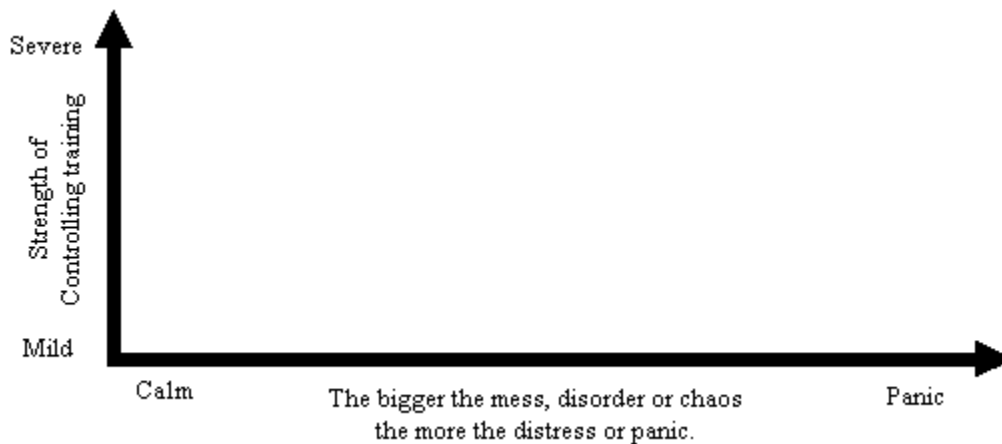
Let's start with a definition: A controller is a person who's nervous system has been altered in childhood in such a way that they get nervous, upset, panicky when things are out of place, and who spends much of their time trying to relax. When something goes out-of-place, their nervous system reacts. Pretty simple. They have difficulty dealing with "normal chaos," and they are just trying to calm down by "doing something" or "fixing something". As far as I know, everyone is a controller to some extent – some more, some less, and I never blame controllers.

When a couple comes in the office for a first visit, I will often test for this issue. If they mention anything like "doing it right or wrong" then I want to know how strong this problem is. What I do is I slide some books onto the floor from a bookcase. I make a mess, and then I watch their blood pressures. Usually this rise in tension is pretty easy to see. I then ask the one I am talking to, "Who do you think this would bother by this more, you or your partner?" Having watched them, I have already seen who it bothers. A sudden jump in blood pressure is pretty visible. I compare their spoken answers with what I have observed about their changes in tension – their non-verbal answers.

Sometimes a person who's blood pressure soared will say that it doesn't bother them at all. Then I can gather that not only do they have the challenge of "control" but they also have the challenge of not telling the truth. Well, it gives me a starting place.

What I've learned is that controllers are trained starting around age 3. At this age a child will typically try to talk with their caretakers about how they see things uniquely differently. If the caretakers are curious and good at listening, ideally if they **mirror** their child, then the child's brain develops rapidly and eventually this contributes to a firm sense of self.

On the other hand, if the caretakers criticize, judge, contradict, etc., then the child shifts from developing its sense of self and begins a never-ending search for "being right, being correct" according to someone outside of themselves. "Mommy. Did I do that right?" "Daddy, am I right?" The stronger this critical teaching, the stronger the child learns to react to thinking or acting out-of-place, the more a controller they become. Simply put, critical, controlling parents produce critical, controlling children, who grow up and eventually find a partner.



Is being a controller good or bad?

So a controller is bothered by things out-of-place or out-of-order. But this is not necessarily a problem. Copy-editors, quality control inspectors, accountants, auditors, brain surgeons, and many others are paid for noticing things out of place. The training of a controller, the reactions of their nervous systems, are helpful in many professions. However, controlling can be a serious problem. Afterall, for a person with this training, their nervous system reacts without their wishing it. Controlling can be a pain in the neck for the person who has it. The stronger

they were trained in childhood, the stronger the effect – the rise in tension. The bigger the mess, the worse the rise in blood pressure. A strongly trained controller can simply pass out if put into a lot of chaos. ([See the Lizard paper.](#))

If the individual lives alone, controlling can usually be managed as the person just neatens things up and keeps them that way. But if they live with someone, this can get to be a big problem especially as the other person may make creative messes.

Typically, a controller marries a controller.

And this usually generates a great problem. Who determines what is the correct definition of rightness or neatness? And what do you do about what I call rebellion - the purposeful, sometimes unconscious, tendency to make a mess or do the wrong thing?

Review #1: Controllers are people who attempt to relax themselves by getting and keeping things in place. When faced with what they think is a mess or chaos, they get nervous. This habit was trained into them in childhood – usually by one or more controlling caretakers.

Rules:

Sandra and I identified the elements of what a controller is focusing upon and we call them Rules. A rule is a way of doing something or a place for something. When a rule is followed a controller relaxes. Here are some examples.

- A kitchen cupboard door should be shut.
- People should not drive faster than the speed limit.
- Computers should be carefully shut down when not in use.
- Smile when you shake someone's hand.
- Sit straight at the table.
- Turn off the water while you brush your teeth.
- Clean your nose with a handkerchief.
- At night, lights should be turned off in rooms when you leave.
- Do not drive through deep water puddles.
- People should say “Please” when asking for something.
- Etc. This list could go on forever.
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Rules are specific to each controller.

Each controller has their own set of rules. What sounds like “this is the way things should be” is really “if things are this way, I will be happy.” Everyone seems to have some rules. Some people seem to have a great many.

Rules also seem to be very general. The part of a person that gets tense ([the Lizard](#)) doesn't seem to notice who is breaking the rule – just that someone is.

I recall once listening to my wife being critical about drivers. I noticed my stomach muscles tensing. I was anticipating that she might criticize me. Actually, she didn't. Later that day I found myself criticizing someone else and noticed that my same stomach muscles were tensing. Criticism made me nervous whether I did it or she did it. My rule was "don't be critical."

One day, Sandra and I sat down (actually it was in the summer and we sat in a stream, Independence Creek, up to our shoulders) and compared our rules. I thought of as many of my rules as I could. Sandra suggested a few more that she thought I had as well. Then she listed her rules and I added to her list. Then we compared the lists. This was quite instructive, and here is what we found.

Two people's Rules are in no way the same.

There is no way that I would have all the same Rules that she would have. I was raised differently. There may be commonly held rules, but the details of these rules will seem quite different. This is a problem with the idea of “common sense”. To me that phrase “common sense” refers to rules that many people seem to share. The problem occurs when I think that my common sense rules are the same as your's. They aren't. This is another

situation where [getting used to the differences between us](#) really helps, as so many people “foolishly” imagine that everyone has the same set of rules.

Rules produce Rebels.

When I was a kid, my mother had many rules. Along the way I learned to assert my difference from her, my uniqueness, by developing some rebelling habits. A rebelling habit is a tendency to do something against someone else’s rule. It could be a big rebellion against a large rule or a small rebellion against a small rule. While the function of the rebellion was probably originally, to assert uniqueness, the current result of the rebellion is typically to produce stress in the rule holder and in the relationship. I think it might be fun to list all the rules you don’t like following, that you rebel against.

Rebels often show their tendencies to fight back in what is called “passive aggressive” behavior. For example, almost all lateness is a hidden form of rebellion. I’ve often said that my first wife was late to everything (except the hairdresser). What drove this aggravating behavior? I’ve learned it was a glorious streak of rebellion – probably initially against her controlling dad or mom.

You will often marry someone who rebels against your rules.

This was a fun discovery, and might be more often true than I’ve seen. It is quite possible that one of the things that makes for a committed partnership is a tendency for one person to rebel in the area of the other person’s rules and vice versa.

- For example, Sandra has a rule about keeping kitchen cabinet doors closed, and I habitually leave kitchen cabinets open. My rebellion directly conflicts with her rule.
- I am very careful when I shut down a computer, while Sandra’s tendency is to flip off the circuit breaker. Her rebellion strikes directly at my rule.
- I fear driving through deep water puddles as the water may get into the engine. Sandra loves driving through water puddles - the deeper the better.

Rules are learned.

Where do these rules come from? What do you think? They seem to be learned at the feet of your parents or other teachers, who tell or show you their rules. They often act to children as if their rules are the “right” rules. (See [MasterTalk](#)) Having looked at a lot people’s rules, here are some thoughts.

For the most part people don’t examine the rules they have, and most commonly children follow other people’s rules without deciding whether they like them or not.

This lack of what I call “self-reference”, this lack of even noticing one’s own thinking or values, is a central issue of self-esteem vs other-esteem. I define self-esteem as “liking yourself even with others hate you.” I define other-esteem as “liking yourself only if others like you.” The same holds true with rules, I believe. Self-rules are the rules I have chosen to live by. Other-rules are the rules other people gave me and I have not even considered whether I would choose these rules.

Now, since breaking rules makes a person tense and following a rule relaxes them, people will tend to follow whatever rules they have at a given time – self-rules or other-rules. Most very active controllers are working so hard to follow the rules they have, that they have never stopped to consider what rules they like and what they want to get rid of or change.

Review #2: Controllers relax when their rules are followed – when things happen according to the instructions they have accepted as being right. This is not a conscious effort, but is more an unconscious reality, a habit. If you or they do something outside of “their rules,” adrenaline will flow in their blood stream and their blood pressure will rise. They try to relax by following, and trying to get you to follow, their rules.

Controllers are generally not very happy people.

The more powerful this drive has been trained into a person, the more often their nervous system becomes active. Adrenaline is not a particularly pleasant drug. Being tense isn’t fun.

When a controller is alone, still they are seeing “things out of place,” or “things that need to be done.” Most controllers are very tense almost all the time. When others are around the whole effect gets multiplied. A controller can easily overload with too much stress.

The verbal form of controlling is called Criticism.

When a controller notes something out of place, they often speak out loud. “Who moved that chair?” “That’s not the right word.” “Your hair needs cutting.” “Where did you get that hat?”

I’ve learned that inside the mind of a controller, such observations are almost constant. Some of them are spoken out loud – the ones that other’s hear. These comments often sound like criticisms, judgements or even orders. I don’t think that is what they really are. I think they are just the normal rambling of the mind of a controller – noticing “things out of place.”

WHAT TO DO

If you are a controller – and we all are to some extent.

I suggest you learn about your rules and re-examine them. Some rules you may find are really valuable. “Don’t put your finger in a light socket when it is turned on.” “Drive to the right in the United States.” Other rules may be silly and useless. “No singing at the dining room table.”

Talk your rules over with your partner to get a firm sense that your rules are yours and not necessarily theirs. If you tend to push others to follow your rules, this is normal. It probably is just an attempt to gain a sense of peace of mind. However, it does not work. Not only do people resist you, but they learn to avoid and dislike you. (Read about [short tempers](#). Learn [Master/Slave](#) and how to be a friend.)

Learn to note when you get overloaded with too many rules being broken. Knowing how many rules you have might be important. This is about you and your training, not about other people. Take care of yourself by having a clean, quiet place to go to in order to refresh yourself.

If you are the partner of a controller – and we all are to some extent.

I suggest you learn to [mirror](#) your partner’s critical sounding statements. This protects you from the sound of “an order” and lets your partner know what they sound like. “So you think the chair should be over there. Did I get that? What do you want to do about it?”

Learn how much distress and chaos is your partner’s lot in life. Help them, don’t obey them. Help them build a place of peace. Learn to [Validate](#) and learn about [Safety](#). I know one guy who counts his wife’s critical comments. If there are more than three in a minute, he shifts to helping her feel calmer. He assumes she is pretty stressed. “Hey, hun. What can I do to help you feel safer or more at peace.” He has learned that when his wife gets really distressed, he can always help by offering to clean house with her. Getting the house clean isn’t as important as his just expressing willingness to help.

Big Problem #1 Managing Tension – Safety

I believe controllers and their partners (and which is which can sometimes be confusing) must become experts at dealing with anxiety, tension, panic. Since their training makes any chaos to erupt in the flow of adrenaline and all its consequences in the body, stress is something these people will be living with. I’ve learned that a controller can become stressed out just by driving past someone else’s front yard that is messy. Thus all the tactics of stress reduction become vital. I think it very important to be familiar with your own level of stress and also easily able to read your partner’s level of stress. This is all the material of the paper I wrote on [Safety and The Lizard](#). If you have to, take courses in stress management. I think you have no choice.

Learn to take [TimeOuts](#) when either you feel overloaded with stress or you think your partner is overloaded with stress.

Big Problem #2 Falling out of Dialogue

Since the challenge facing controllers is physical, i.e. a trained reaction of their nervous systems, I’ve found that they can easily think that others have the same reactions to the same things. This tendency to think that others are just like us is sometimes called “[Emotional Symbiosis](#)” and is the opposite of being dialogical. It is extremely

important that a controller learn, and that their partner remind them, that other people are different, have different rules and different reactions

Examples: A controller says, "People should not wear hats in a restaurant." Their partner responds, "I hear that's a rule for you. I certainly see lots of people who think wearing hats is fine."

A controller says, "I have to get my Christmas cards out earlier this year. Oh. Christmas cards sending is one of my rules. I think I have to send them. I bet the card stores like me."

As part of this retraining, I want the partner to mirror the controller, validate them AND speak of their own difference. I think you need to do this over and over

Examples: A controller says, "The bed has to be made every morning." The partner responds, "I hear you believe beds should be made in the morning. I bet it makes you uncomfortable when you see beds unmade later in the day? And, heck, I don't even notice this. Let's go make the bed now."

Controller says, "Aren't rollercoasters so scary?" Partner responds, "I hear that rollercoasters scare you. I actually enjoy going on a rollercoaster. Isn't it fun to be so different. I certainly wouldn't try to get you on one. But can you wait while I take a ride?"

Controller says, "This is the way to do this." Partner responds, "So you like to do it that way. I prefer to do it this other way. We're just different."

Big Problem #3 Dangers of Obedience/Bullying

I think this is the biggest problem. While a controller is simply trying to relax, they often try to get other people to cooperate and help. This can very easily take the form of persuasion, manipulation, coercion, and outright bullying. This polarizes the couple into winners/losers or into contestants/arguing. This is extremely dangerous for both. Truth to tell, I do not know who I think is more responsible for this horrible but common situation – the one who bullies or the one who gives in. Either way, resentment grows in both members of the relationship.

Example: I met a husband recently who said that his wife demanded that their whole house had to be kept spotless. His stuff was not "allowed" anywhere in that house – not even his pictures or deer heads on the wall. He said to me, "Can't I have a little space for me." I asked him why he had let his partner take over so much. Just because she had the ability to bully or demand, didn't mean she should get away with it. It was his job to make sure she only got her part of the situation and he got his. By giving in completely, by being so passive, he had "turned her into a monster." Not very loving of him.

My suggestion is that neither partner ever accept "obedience". If you are the controller, don't accept it when your partner says, "Yes dear" and looks submissive. Change this. Dialogue about it. If you are the partner of a controller, there is nothing wrong with doing what your partner wants because a) it will help calm them down and b) you are feeling generous. Never do it if you feel you "have to" and it isn't one of your rules!

Read my [Master/Slave paper](#) for all the details. Read it many times aloud to each other. Don't let this happen! Determine to move to Friend/Friend and stay there.

Learn to Love Controllers

As I've said before, controllers are people who go into distress when they see disorder. Thus they get tense a lot. They cannot help this. It was taught to them in childhood and is part of who they are. They can deal with it. You can deal with it. Since we all are controllers to some extent, I think it best to learn to lovingly understand yourself or your partner. I remember the Rumpole Mystery series, where the hero called his wife "She who must be obeyed." This always sounded so disrespectful. I met a guy who called his wife, "She who sees things out of place." This seemed better.

I love the movie [As Good As It Gets](#) with Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt as a wonderful, loving look at the challenges facing controllers.