

Fireside Chat for practitioners working with people in coercive control abuse dynamics

Full event description:

What is coercive control? Coercive control is an insidious and multi-dimensional form of abusive dynamic that often manifests as patterns of behaviour over time and can overlap with other forms of abuse. Any relationship configuration of people of any combination of gender, number of partners, politics, and background can experience coercive control, although some specific forms of coercive control are linked to misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, monogamist, ableist, sexist, racist, and/or colonising ideologies. Coercive control can involve gradual or sudden increases in controlling, threatening, monitoring, or manipulative behaviour. Threats can be emotional, reputational, moral, or other.

Is coercive control legally recognised? Coercive control became a criminal offence in the UK in 2015, and The Victorian Family Violence Protection Act 2008 [http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/fvpa2008283/s5.html] defines family violence as including emotional, psychological, and economic forms of abuse and coercive behaviour. Some legal protections are available to help people experiencing coercive control dynamics, but anecdotal reports suggest these are unevenly applied and often ineffective.

Some Australian states and territories are considering new legislation that recognises coercive control as a specific criminal offence. There is debate within the Intimate Partner Violence/Family Violence/Domestic Violence sector in Australia and abroad regarding the benefits and drawbacks of criminalising coercive control. One potential benefit includes making it possible for police and courts to identify and prosecute patterns of controlling and coercive behaviours rather than specific incidents of abuse or violence, while potential drawbacks include the potential for re-traumatising people during court proceedings and the potential for abusive partners or family members to weaponise coercive control legislation to mischaracterise people targeted for abuse as perpetrators as part of the manipulative dynamic this legislation is designed to address. Various alternative options are currently being debated and explored.

How might professionals encounter coercive control? Coercive control might include pressure for access to social media accounts, constant accusatory or angry texts, or embarrassing people in front of others. Coercive control can also often involve mind games, humiliation, and gaslighting— a form of psychological manipulation that results in people doubting their perceptions, abilities, feelings, and reality. Therapists often encounter coercive control dynamics unexpectedly, even after using available interpersonal violence/abuse screening tools. Partners enacting

or being targeted for coercive control dynamics might deny the problem or insist it is mutual. Therapists working with coercive control dynamics may be affected vicariously, with fogginess, ambiguity, dissociative detachment, fear of retaliation by the abusive person, vague fears or anticipatory anxiety responses prior to contact, and various forms of traumatic response very commonly reported. Therapists may experience a parallel process where we doubt our own perception that something is off or take with us after sessions a nagging sense that we may have unintentionally colluded with mischaracterising the targeted partner as equally responsible for the problem. Research shows that common counselling and psychotherapy techniques are often ineffective or may even be harmful in these situations.

How will this event address coercive control dynamics? This fireside chat space is designed to invite therapists in to share these challenging experiences and learn some effective ways we can support each other in a community of care. Although future PACFA webinars may focus on therapeutic techniques to use with clinical participants, that is not our focus for this event. This fireside chat is also not intended as a space for ideological debate on solutions or 'expert opinions', as the research in this area is emerging and few therapists have formal training in this area beyond one-off general sessions that may or may not apply across demographics and circumstances. We also know that therapists are likely to encounter distinct challenges based on our own lived experience, privilege, and intersecting forms of oppression we face. Instead, we hope this will be a rare opportunity for therapists to discuss our own emotional challenges in doing this work, to explore the work/life impact of supporting people in coercive control abuse dynamics, and to grow together alongside each other through supportive interactions and engaging with some community of care techniques to help each other manage the emotional impact of this work.

PACFA will be contacting everyone who registers before the event with a pre-event accessibility needs survey, which will inform our design of the event. Prior to this event, we will also be sending some guidelines for participants to agree to help us co-create a trauma-informed, anti-racist, anti-oppressive space together and a running sheet to outline the content for greater disability and neurodiversity inclusion. By registering for this event, you are giving permission for the organisers to have your names and contact details to follow up with you prior to this event."

Who can participate this event? This event is open to all PACFA members and non-members who are counsellors, psychotherapists, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander healing practitioners, family therapists, social workers, mental health nurses, psychologists, community workers, and other health and social care practitioners.

We welcome registrants **of any personal identity or lived experience** to this general PACFA event, which is jointly hosted by the Diversity in Gender, Body, Kinship, & Sexuality Interest Group [<https://pacfa.org.au/Portal/About/Interest-Grps/LGBTQI-IG.aspx>] as part of our commitment to discuss under-addressed issues in kinship dynamics.

Registrations close by 10 am AEDT (ACT/NSW/VIC time) on Tuesday 26th Oct to ensure the facilitators have adequate time to receive accessibility needs pre-surveys, to prepare and distribute guidelines adapted based on the group's pre-survey needs, and to receive confirmation from all registrants that they agree to follow the community of care guidelines for this event.

Facilitator Bios:

Dr Vivienne Colegrove is a relationship/family therapist with an interest in working with couples and families where a trauma history is affecting their ability to have the relationships they would like. Understanding the link between the long shadow cast by intergenerational trauma – especially in families impacted by violence – and the way sometimes subtle and ingrained coercive and controlling dynamics may show up in relationships is key to working effectively with this client group. Vivienne developed and tested a new therapy – Tuning Relationships with Music® - in response to an awareness that many of our existing methodologies may be inadequate to assist therapists to recognise and effectively intervene with nonverbal, autonomic and embodied manifestations of coercive control that may drive and maintain relational problems.

Vivienne is a white, cisgender, monogamous gay woman and acknowledges the privilege that these bestow. She has been impacted by the violence of others, including coercive control in intimate and professional/public contexts.

Dr Gávi Ansara (He/him) (PhD Psychol, MCouns) is an AAFT-Accredited Clinical Supervisor, AAFT-Registered Clinical Family Therapist, and PACFA-Registered Clinical Psychotherapist with over 20 years of anti-oppressive practice experience working internationally within communities of people with lived experiences of trauma, marginalisation, exclusion, and oppression. This includes people from commonly excluded relationship and chosen family configurations, such as people in same/similar gender, queerplatonic, polyamorous/multi-partnered (trios, quads, polycules, etc.), and BDSM/kink kinship systems. He received the American Psychological Association's Transgender Research Award for original and significant research, the UK Higher Education Academy's National Psychology Postgraduate Teaching Award for excellence in teaching psychology, and the University of Surrey Vice Chancellor's Alumni Achievement Award for outstanding contributions to standards and policies in international human rights and social justice.

Gávi is a hybrid polycultural, multilingual man of faith who grew up in urban and rural China, unceded Eora Nation, and elsewhere. He currently lives on the sovereign lands of the Boon Wurrung people in the Kulin Nations. He is an androsexual, polyamorous, and neurodivergent allistic (autistic activist term for non-autistic) person who is also an experienced BDSM/kink Mentor. His work is informed by personal lived experience of disability, poverty, homelessness, racist violence, and gender, body, kinship, and sexuality oppression. He strives toward cultural humility regarding his literacy, verbal, allistic, binary gender, sighted, and non-Aboriginal privilege in an allistic-centric, ableist, binarising, colonising, and racist society. He has witnessed as a therapist, and experienced as a person, the harmful impact of coercive control dynamics and other forms of interpersonal violence in intimate and professional/public spaces.