



# *Surviving* Post Separation Abuse

& YOUR HIGH CONFLICT CO-PARENT

Day 1: **Monday, April 17th**

Understanding Coercive Control Post Separation

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola, DSW, LCSW**

[00:00:00]

**Sybil:** Hello everyone and welcome. I'm so excited to have you here at our expert interview virtual summit, surviving post-separation abuse, and a high conflict co-parent. Our goal here really is to offer you actionable strategies so that to help you understand, communicate, Co-parent or a parallel parent regulate and really mitigate all that comes in the aftermath of an abusive relationship.

I'm Sybil Cummin. I'm a licensed professional counselor. I am the creator of Rising Beyond Power and Control, the Rising Beyond Community and The Rising Beyond Podcast. And we. Are starting off this summit with a bang. I am so excited. I have Dr. Christine Kochi here with me, who is gonna really talk about coercive control.

What does that look like post separation? And then what are things that you can do [00:01:00] to not only survive this, but to protect you and your children during this process? So Dr. Cocchiola is a coercive control educator, researcher and survivor. She is a full-time college professor teaching social work for the last 20 years, and has been a social justice advocate since the age of 19, volunteering for a local domestic violence and sexual assault agency.

Her expertise is in the area of coercive control and the traumatic experiences of both adult and child victims researching and developing training on these topics both nationally and internationally. Dr. Cocchiola is the creator of the Protective Parenting Program, guiding protective parents toward healing their children, victims of the coercive controller.

Thank you so much for being here. I am so excited for you to kick off our summit.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Oh, thank you so much for doing this. This is amazing. This is exactly what everyone needs to hear over and over again.

**Sybil:** Over and over again, and hearing, if you're hearing this for the first time, [00:02:00] you might feel overwhelmed and you may need to go back and listen again.

You have access to that to do that. And so you know, take what you can from each interview. And if you need more, if you have questions, reach out. We are happy to answer them. So what is coercive control? What does that mean?

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** So when I think about simplifying the definition of coercive control, it is really about pivoting towards the perpetrator.

It's when a coercive controller tries to strip away our agency, our autonomy in an intimate relationship. So it's really about someone purposefully, with pattern behavior, taking away our ability to know what we should know, to really see ourselves as separate beings and really creating a space where there is a lot of confusion and a lot of self-doubt. And [00:03:00] because it happens so insidiously, it truly is like someone having power over us, but we don't even know they have power over us. And so any ability for us to have personal power in this dynamic is taken away. And so it truly is something that even the most astute of us can miss the signs in that relationship.

I do talk about the fact that I am a survivor. I was married to someone for 27 years, met this person when I was 16 years old. Teach on this every single semester, have been doing this work since the age of 19, and did not recognize that slowly over a period of time, my own autonomy in my family system was being removed.

So, I think I, I say that because I want victims and survivors to always know that it's never at their fault, ever, and that there is no shame in this because someone purposefully did try to harm you. [00:04:00] And so if we unpack it a little more, we go a little deeper now. The strategies that these abusers use, the strategies they use are psychological abuse.

It's gaslighting, manipulation, intimidation, isolation, and I really always wanna point out that it's not always a 10. It's not like, oh, I was locked in a room, or I could never go out and go to work, or I wasn't allowed to see my family or my friends. It can be so again, insidious.

**Sybil:** That it is. It really is the best word to describe it.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** It really is, because for some people, by the way, it can be horrifying and locked in a room. We see this in cults. We saw this

recently with the NXIVM cult, right? So it can be that, and it also can be, of course, physically violent too. I mean, power and control can be exerted through physical violence.

But the reality is, is that I think the signs that are most readily [00:05:00] missed are the when they're not as overt. When it isn't so intense. If somebody locked you in a room, you'd probably say, oh my gosh, something is really wrong here. But if somebody just made you feel perhaps badly for going over to your parents' house again this Sunday, and they did that over and over again, and to the point that you stopped going as frequently to your parents' house.

Then you question yourself. Is it me? Am I maybe being too sensitive? Am I maybe wanting to see my parents too much? And this person has a right to feel this way? So see, all that self-doubt starts to enter. And so, yeah, and then we add in that oftentimes these abusers very often use intermittent reinforcement.

Which only strengthens the trauma bond because if that person says, oh, of course, go to your mom and dad's. I'll see you when you get home this week. But then next week, they're upset with you for going, well, then there's this push pull like, wait a minute, is it okay? Am I upsetting him? Am I all right [00:06:00] in behaving this way?

So all of that is the psychological. So further than that is that of course they use these other strategies such as legal abuse and financial abuse, and sometimes sexual abuse. And of course, I always say the most heartbreaking is weaponizing the children some way. And so the, the financial abuse oftentimes shows up.

Again, pretty insidiously. Maybe they're not depositing as much money into the family account that they said they would, but then they said, oh, I forgot. Or, oh, I didn't get paid as much this week. Or it could be, oh, you're getting a manicure. Hmm, that's nice. Good for you. And a little snarky about it.

Right? So they don't really want you spending the money on yourself. Or it can be you're on a budget and you're not allowed to work. So you see there's so many variations. But then that financial abuse often really dips into legal abuse because once I've left the relationship, now I'm going to do whatever I can to continually control you.

[00:07:00] So, and then again, as I said, the sexual abuse and the use of children as weapons. I mean, it's a mouthful. There's a lot there. Yes. But I think sometimes saying it over again as we have these conversations because victims

almost need to hear it again and again to understand that they actually may be a victim.

**Sybil:** Yeah, and there's this idea too, of that, if you said one of those things to a friend, to your accountant, to your whomever, it's like, okay, it doesn't seem that bad. Like each individual, something in and of itself doesn't seem that bad. Like maybe he was having a bad day. Let's give him the benefit of the doubt, or let's give her the benefit of the doubt.

And that's how it can just pile up and pile up and pile up. And if you're doubting your own experiences, you're like, oh yeah, that might be it. That might be it. And so it is, so hard. And the [00:08:00] term coercive control is not used, I like that it's being used more now, but it's not as mainstream used. And so, my experience, I'm interested in yours is the two terms that are really like out there is domestic violence or intimate partner violence and narcissistic abuse. And a lot of people don't subscribe to being a victim of domestic violence because their conception of what a victim looks like is the misperception that's out there, right?

You know, if you're not a low income, low education young female, then you must not be a victim. Right? Like, I, I don't fit that. And then narcissistic abuse is a newer term, which I feel like a lot of people subscribe to more when it is that coercive control and there's not physical abuse that they can point to.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Wow, there's a lot there. I wrote a couple of notes, right? I do think it's really important to change our vernacular. The lang [00:09:00] language matters here, and so I think. As we define coercive control I think it's really important that people understand that coercive control is the umbrella term for all of these abuses, all of them.

And so another way to look at it is it's the foundation of most domestic abuse. What we know now is most domestic abuse, and I use the word abuse because it's not always physically violent, and we do for legislation, look through the violent incident model. Right now we have five states that have codified coercive controls a form of domestic violence. What that means is a victim doesn't have to show up with a bruise to prove that she's been harmed. This is fantastic. Now, again, 45 states. If she doesn't have a bruise, she wasn't a victim. Yeah. And when we know the foundation of it is it's someone having power over another person, right? Yes. And so changing the terminology as I was doing an interview yesterday and talking about this idea that I think the coercive control is really when we think about racism, when we think of [00:10:00] genderism, when we think of any kind of form of child abuse.

I mean, sexual perpetrators, they use grooming. The stages of grooming are coercive control. And so really knowing that this happens, and I know you understand this terminology on the micro level and intimate relationships, it happens on the meso level. This happens in systems and it happens on the macro level. It happens with our government and policies.

You know, think about groups of people who are able to oppress groups of people think about cults. This is all coercive control. And so what I say is not all narcissists are coercive controllers. But all coercive controllers are narcissists. I mean, the reality is, is that this is about me needing to have a sense of power over someone in order to feel to feel good, to feel safe, to feel okay in life. And that is such a, a sad statement for a human being, that they need to have power over others to feel this way. Right?

[00:11:00] So I think that, if your listeners could go and viewers could go home with this one thought, so I, I quote. Dr. Evan Stark frequently, he always says it's an unknowing of what we know. That's what coercive control is. But he also says it's like, it's like carpenter ants devouring the foundation of a home, and you don't even know it's happening. You don't even know it's happening. And if your neighbor's home literally collapsed because they had carpenter ants, would anyone for one moment say, why didn't you move?

Right. Yeah. No. No one would ever ask that. They would feel so no idea badly for them. Yet, what do we ask victims all the time? Why didn't you leave? Because she or whoever the victim is, often doesn't even know it's happening. They often don't even see it. I mean, occurring. It's so insidious and it's so intermittent and there is good, and our brain wants so badly to hold on to [00:12:00] positive experiences.

Our brain so badly wants to go back to that safety place when that abuser is not abusive. We love that we hold onto that so tight again, that trauma bonding. You know, sometimes abusers have to be coercive controllers, I like to call them, sometimes they have to be so horrible for a victim to actually leave sometimes.

What do we hear victims say? If he had only hit me? Yes, had only hit me. For those who haven't been hit, I'm so sorry for those who have been physically harmed, that's no way diminishing your experiences. But some people, when it hasn't happened that way, and what we know about Complex PTSD is that oftentimes when there isn't physical violence, it's almost worse.

Research is showing us because there's no ability to explain it. It's so difficult to explain.

**Sybil:** And you're not believe. Anywhere you're at. Right? That's the experience of so many of the women I work with is they are not believed and they don't really have a way to [00:13:00] succinctly say what's happening?

And they will, they'll latch onto a word because they'll find that, and they're like, that's what I'm experiencing, that's it. I always tell people like, the term gaslighting was not created just for you. Like, you're not the only one. Webster Dictionary or, or Wikipedia did not create that word for you.

There's so many and so you're not alone in your experience.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Absolutely.

**Sybil:** And so how do you see coercive control look different? I know we talked a little bit about the legal abuse piece and using children. I see that using children throughout, like weaponizing children throughout the relationship, not just after someone's left.

But how does that coercive control look different post separation?

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Yeah, and I love that you just mentioned that because this is what I tell protective moms and protective parents all of the time. Is that, you only saw the coercive controller harming your children, or maybe only began to recognize it after you left, but that person was doing that from [00:14:00] the moment that child was born.

Anybody who has the pathology that sets them up to be a coercive controller they need this object to give them attention and, and to get to feed them. And so at when that child is born, they are working on that. They may not be insidiously trying to harm your relationship with that child, but my guess is that they are. My guess is that most often, not every abuser, and it depends again on the level of pathology, but that most abusers are working.

The whole time to ensure that they have that position of power, not only over you in relationship to your child creating triangulation, but also in relationship to the child. The child sees them in a more endearing way or the child fears them so that the child will align and adhere to their rules. And so I always say these coercive controllers are working double time to create children who are compromised and don't have agency.[00:15:00]

**Sybil:** Yeah, the term I like, and I can't remember where I heard this term, but when I heard it, I was like, it's like the child of a narcissist needs to be a complacent object. And I was like, yes. Gross. And when they're no longer complacent is when things can get really scary.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Yeah, so, so the role of the child is shifting oftentimes in that dynamic, right? And that as a protective parent, if you think you're in a relationship with someone like this, I want you to really think about that your child is already being harmed. They are, they have been for a long period of time. And that's why if you can leave no judgment here, if you can escape.

Because here's the other thing that Dr. Stark talks about is that a woman has never truly escaped because when she escapes, it often gets worse.

**Sybil:** It keeps happening. It's a different, it's like one of my people was like, it's the death by death by a thousand paper cuts.

But yeah, that's so many. And the reason y'all why we're here for this summit is [00:16:00] because very rarely are people you know, women who are leaving, the focus is the escape and then resources kind of dwindle and nobody has told you, guess what? You're in for a whole nother type of, of damage right now, and that it, it might continue if you have kids together.

I mean forever it seems, but at least till they're 18 potentially. And I'll let you kinda respond to that. But, we want to also let you know there are things you can do to protect yourself, you know, help yourself regulate and manag things better to help protect your kids. Cuz it definitely sounds, you know, super Debbie Downer.

I'm like, this could last forever. And our goal here isn't to rub salt in the wound. Our goal here is to offer you things that you can do to improve your circumstances and to heal in spite of, or despite of, I don't ever know the right languaging there, of post-separation abuse. [00:17:00]

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Yeah. I mean, I think it, what you bring up is an important part, right?

So the court systems are complicit in this, right? And they further coercively control our clients, they further harm our clients. But like you said, I mean, first of all, of course, the expectation is that anybody who has experienced this is

engaged in trauma informed therapy. Because it's just so important that you have someone that you can go to who understands your experiences.

If you are with a therapist who is telling you, oh, you have anxiety, or you have depression, and has not pointed out the fact that you might be in an abusive relationship, run for the hills and get another therapist. Because that person does not understand coercive control, and that's hugely problematic.

I'm actually creating a training right now as we speak to ensure that therapists can actually understand this. And that becomes another gaslighting by the system. Yes. Right. So, I think that of course, first of all, that people are engaged in that kind of trauma informed therapy, but [00:18:00] also understanding that the number one protective factor for all of these children is that protective parent.

**Sybil:** Yes. Yes. That, did you hear that? You are the number one protective factor in building your kiddos resilience and having them have healthy relationships. It's you.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Mm-hmm. It is. And you have much more power than you think you do.

And so I think that what happens is when we have been so harmed, and then maybe sometimes our children are actually role modeling some of those behaviors in our home, and we are so overwhelmed. I think probably my, I mean, there's so many pieces of insight. I hope I impart to people, but, is that you have to actually behave in your home, not like their parent, you actually have to behave like a trauma informed therapist. I mean, truly take on the role of being in that home, seeing your child through the lens of their experiences [00:19:00] and not take anything personal cuz nothing is personal.

**Sybil:** No, and I'm a mama, that can be hard. Like that can be really hard not for me to turn into an eight year old as well when I'm parenting my almost eight year old.

So what are some things that a parent can do to regulate themselves enough so that they can attune and regulate to their kiddos?

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** So, I mean, there's so many things and sometimes this sounds very cliché, but of course, you know, first of all, there is brand new research out that shows that if you do exercises, your muscles actually release dopamine.



Like, can you imagine the brain is actually like related to our leg muscles. So of course exercise and a cold, cold shower to help yourself regulate every single day, a hot bath. There's so many things that we can be doing. But outside of that, what if protective parents were to come up with a [00:20:00] list of three to five ways that their children trigger them?

What are the things that your child does every time they come home from a transition that you can pretty much bank on them doing? Yep. What are the things when you know that maybe your adolescent daughter is gonna get her period. Like what is gonna be her go-to? Because kids go to a particular place when they're dysregulated, and oftentimes it's projected onto their safe parent.

They don't know that parent's safe. Yeah. They're, they're questioning that. So again, how did they trigger you? But then by the way, you're triggering them. How do you trigger your children? What are you doing?

**Sybil:** I lecture. I lecture my children when I am not regulated.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Mm-hmm. Okay. So, or is there a word? So let's, I mean, let's even be more specific. So your child comes home from visiting dad and you're just trying to be nice. Like you're just literally [00:21:00] just trying to be like, you know, Hey, how is dinner with dad? And the moment you say that, because they're so dysregulated, because he has told them over and over again, "she's gonna ask you about me. She's gonna talk about me." And you're actually doing it from an authentically kind place, but your child is prepared. And so do you even mention that? When they come home, if every time you ask, how was dinner with dad? Or how was your visit with dad? You get a roll of the eyes or you get some kind of reaction, then you need to see that that's triggering them.

What can you do differently? When they come home could you just be kind of like laying on the couch reading a book, let them come to you, say, Hey honey, how are you? And that's it. You know, of course, acknowledge them.

I think another thing that helps is I always say that, when we have been so traumatized and triggered we're not using ourselves intentionally in the home. So what would happen if you actually said, I am going to be an [00:22:00] actor in my kitchen tonight. I'm not gonna be mom, I'm gonna be an actor. I'm gonna be mom in like, you know, her role and actually play a part, a different part. Not the part of the kid who won't put the dishes in the dishwasher and now you're mad.

Now, that doesn't mean we don't hold them to boundaries, but it just means we have to figure out a different way to behave because they're expecting us to behave a certain way. So, I mean, those are just some ideas.

You know, I say we have armor on. We have to have armor on all the time. They are sending arrows our way to see what sticks, to see how much they can penetrate. And the more that those arrows fall off of us, the less they're gonna do it.

**Sybil:** And they're gonna feel safe too. And so, you know, if they know they can kind of trigger you every time at first, that's kind of, I think, comfortable for them. Of like, I do this, this happens, I do this, this happens. But they don't enjoy the lecture, which is my [00:23:00] wonderful, that's what I choose do, and I'm not responding and I'm reacting, right?

Mm-hmm. But when they have that consistency that I can throw these things and she reacts playfully. Or she gives me some grace or, does something different. And that's consistent that then becomes the safe. And they know what to expect. I mean, if you think about it, do you ever, we were talking about that conditioning where sometimes they're amazing and sometimes they're not.

Right? And so your ex is not gonna ever give consistency. They're never gonna know what to expect. Like you never knew what to expect really. And so we can give our kids the knowing what to expect. And that feels safe.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Right. And then when we do mess up, because we will, because we are triggered, because we are trauma victims. When we do mess up, we take responsibility. And that's [00:24:00] the difference. And we change. And so again, there is something to be said about, you don't have to be perfect, but we need to really work hard to be on that stage performing in a way that is healthy for our children, even if we don't feel it, because the brain will actually begin to change if we actually, as you know, Sybil, right? If we, if we play the part, our brain will actually learn that new part. The brain is resilient. There's neuroplasticity. Our children can heal. If your child is always angry every time they come home, if you change your response, your, excuse me, your reaction to that anger, they will actually, eventually not be as angry. Now you might screw up and when you do, you're gonna say, I'm sorry, and I am mom's gonna work on this. That is so different than what they would ever get from that abuser.

**Sybil:** Yeah, and giving them that different, I think you said this and something I listened to and I just like stole it and am using it. But giving your kids the gift

of perspective. I [00:25:00] think that you had said that in something and I was. Yes, we're giving them the gift of a safe place to fall. Mm-hmm. And someone who will repair, like we're talking about, like apologize and make change. Non-judgmental peace because they're gonna feel that and then they're gonna feel what they feel like with a parent where strings are always attached.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Absolutely.

**Sybil:** You will feel the difference.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** And I think part of all of this is just, it's as victims and survivors, there's again, so much trauma, but if we could really, again, apply that same lens to the experiences of children, even if he treats them like gold. They are still his victims.

Doesn't matter if they fair him, they are his victims. If they avoid, if they say everything's fine, it doesn't matter to me, they're disassociating more. If that's their trauma response, it doesn't mean they're not trauma victims. He is [00:26:00] abusing them. Be clear that's it's child abuse.

**Sybil:** Yeah, and there's this misconception that you and I, you know, we know the thing, but there's this idea that someone who abuses their spouse or their partner could be an amazing parent.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** No, absolutely absolutely not.

**Sybil:** That's just not true. Like, I wish, gosh, do I wish that was true?

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Right. Right. Especially when in 90% of cases, coercive control intensifies post separation. And what is the number one tool hanging around to weaponize? The children. I mean, that's the tool that they can use, so of course they're gonna use that.

Anything to get revenge, anything at all. If I can't control you, then I'm going to do whatever I can to hurt you.

**Sybil:** Yeah, one of my people always says this, but that she's so worried that the courts are gonna allow, which of course they do a lot of times the kids to be collateral damage.

And that is [00:27:00] kind of how they're seen of like, it's not like, oh, I feel so horrible about using Susie to harm mom. Oh no, there that's not there. It's, I

need to harm. This is how I can do it. Mm-hmm. And so, yeah, it's like the kids are collateral damage within that, you know, counter parenting or using kids in post liberation abuse.

And it's really sad. It's really sad, but,

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** But on a positive note.

**Sybil:** Yeah, but hear us that again and all the research does say that a safe, unconditional caregiver provides the best opportunity for resilience and good mental health and good physical health, and all the things for your kids.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Absolutely.

**Sybil:** That's why it's important to take care of you so that you really get to give that to your kids and that you can, you can do it better than me. I'm a, I'm a child's [00:28:00] therapist, right? I do play therapy all day, every day, and you are more important than me in that child's world, and you can do more than I can do for their resilience and healing.

So I think that's so important. Do you have any kinda finishing or ending thoughts for our listeners or viewers?

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Just that I think it's just again, important to reiterate that you truly, I mean, I always say that protective parents are their children's saving grace that you can show them I call it a path to freedom, freedom away from the coercive controller.

So they may not know who that person is yet, they may not actually recognize it, but that's okay because you keep showing up as your best trauma informed self for these children and eventually the difference is gonna be very easy to discern.

**Sybil:** And you may think that, oh, I have to tell my kids like I need them [00:29:00] to understand they will understand eventually, and maybe they don't know any details, zero details, and that's okay because their nervous systems will understand. Their nervous systems will will, understand safety and will understand not safety.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** I totally agree. I would add this. I think that one of the things that we tend to do as parents, because we don't wanna put our

children in the middle, is we allow everyone to keep walking around the elephant in the room.

And if the coercive controller has done something that has been wrong, and I am not an attorney, so this is not legal advice. My disclaimer is, you always check with your attorney first, but if that person has done something that's so obvious. There's nothing wrong with saying, I'm sorry that happened.

I'm guessing that hurt. Or how did that, how did that make you feel? I'm sorry that happened. Or, if the child is coming home and saying something about you that is totally not true and you're afraid to say something. No, [00:30:00] absolutely lay the truth out there. That's not. Not sure where you heard that, but that's not true.

And be really clear about it because they, they only hear one story. They are only given one narrative. And if we don't change that narration with honesty and authenticity. This is not about putting down the other person at all. We don't have to say a word about him. All we have, all we can say is that's not true.

Or I don't agree, or I'm sorry, you heard that. And you can also ask them how they feel about it, and then maybe if they're ready, they'll begin talking with you about it. And that is when their eyes really begin to open.

**Sybil:** Yeah, and I think if you listen to everything that was kind of just said, the focus is on the child.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Yes.

**Sybil:** The focus is on how this harmed them, their experience of. Rather than any, again, we're not taking things [00:31:00] personally. It's not about you in that moment. It's about your child.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Oh, I love that because it's right, if they call you a name, it's not personal. Don't feel hurt, it's not about you needing to defend yourself.

It is about you setting the record straight. And the only person that helps in that moment is your child.

**Sybil:** Is your kiddo. Cuz I do, I hear that all the time. Like I wanted to say this cuz I need them to know X, Y, Z. And it's like, what is in the best interest of your child versus you?

It could be to not say anything, or it could be to really attune to what your child is needing right now. They needed something, if they called you the B word. Mm-hmm. May not it may not be that, you know, whatever, the, the game that they wanted or whatever, that may not have been the need, but what need can you fill in that moment for them?

And so, yeah. And so all the things that you had said, are really child focused. How is this affecting the child? What [00:32:00] is their experience of this? And you really can't go wrong, honestly, if that's, if that's your intention, that's your focus. So, yeah. Yeah. Well, again, I just wanna thank you. I think this is so important to offer people that are trudging their way through the swamp.

You know, just like feet getting stuck and their shoes coming off in the mud and all the things giving them, you know, the hand or the step or the something so that they can see, like there there is a light, that there are things I can do to help myself and help my child. And they're not things that are out of your reach, you can do these things.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Absolutely.

**Sybil:** Thank you so much for being here, and thank you all for being here and make sure that you check your inbox for tomorrow's expert interview and we will just keep on learning together and thanks for joining us.

**Dr. Christine Cocchiola:** Thank you [00:33:00] Sybil.