Who’s Pulling Your Strings

How to Break the Cycle of Manipulation and Regain Control of Your Life

By Harriet B. Braiker, Ph.D.; McGraw-Hill, 2004

Many people suffer and endure relationships that leave them feeling manipulated and controlled. Whether it is within the context of a romantic relationship, the workplace, or that within your own family and circle of friends, it is dangerous to ignore the effects of such manipulative relationships on your emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

This illuminating book shares with you proven methods to help you thwart manipulators and ultimately break free from their destructive and toxic influences. Based on sound psychological theory, research, and years of clinical experience, Who’s Pulling Your Strings? offers an in-depth review of the nature of manipulative relationships and the extent of its psychological damage. More importantly, the valuable, health-protecting programs shared by this book will prove valuable to those who wish to regain control of their lives once and for all.

BOOK FOR THE WEEK:

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An Overview of Manipulation

Manipulation can be a highly stressful experience. It can have adverse effects on one's physical, emotional, and mental health. It can be an unpleasant, demeaning, and disturbing experience.

Manipulation is different from legitimate, direct, above-board influence. Healthy, appropriate influence is guided by openness, honesty, and directness of communication. Threats and coercion are rarely employed. Instead, a system of rewards is used, and everyone knows and understands why they are being influenced to do certain things or behave in certain ways.

Conversely, manipulation is characterized by deceitfulness, deviousness, and indirectness of communication. Threats, intimidation, and coercion are the preferred tactics. They are skilled at coercion and control; they often use subtle and sneaky ways to get what they want from their victims. As a result, the manipulative character of the relationship has already taken root before its true nature becomes apparent to the victim.

Some people, however, are less conscious of their manipulative behaviors. They usually act out of fear, insecurity, or some intense emotional dysfunction to get what they want out of people. Although they may not fully appreciate or become aware of the negative impact of their manipulative acts, the result is similar to the one who manipulates consciously and deliberately. Whether the manipulator acts consciously or not, the victim's compliance or capitulation only rewards the manipulator's efforts and encourages the manipulative relationship even further.

Moreover, everyone is vulnerable to manipulation; although others are more susceptible to it because of their personality or attitude towards life. Nonetheless, there are ways to resist and altogether stop manipulation. One only needs to be strong and courageous in tackling this problem.

Signs of Manipulation

Manipulation comes in different forms and guises. Notwithstanding this, there are ways to effectively deal with it. One should only learn and understand the dynamics of manipulation and the resistance tactics to overcome it.

Even though anyone and everyone are vulnerable to manipulation, certain people are more prone to be controlled and manipulated by skilled manipulators. These people are like walking targets for manipulators because they display certain personality traits, behaviors, and ways of thinking that render them extremely vulnerable to manipulative control. These “soft targets” are an easy mark for manipulators.

The Tell-tale Signs of a Soft Target

To know if you are an easy mark for manipulators, you must become aware of the “buttons” of vulnerability that you unwittingly show to others and that marks you off as an easy target for manipulation. Learning and understanding these “buttons” is the first step towards resisting manipulation.

Button No. 1: The “Disease to Please” or People-Pleasing Syndrome

People who have the “disease to please” or people-pleasing syndrome feel a compulsive even addictive need to please others. They feel controlled by their need to please people. They also cannot control the pressures and demands brought on by their intense need to please on their lives.

ABOUT THE BOOK:

Author: Harriet B. Braiker
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The emotional dials of people-pleasers are tuned in to other people's needs and the expectations that these people have of them; often in utter disregard of their own needs. This happens because their self-esteem is tied up with the amount of work that they do for others and with how successful they are at pleasing them. People-pleasers mistakenly believed that they can gain love and a sense of self-worth by fulfilling the needs of others at the expense of their own needs.

In addition, people-pleasers' very identity hinges on their being seen by others and by themselves as nice. Their excessive sense of responsibility for the welfare and happiness of others often drive them to do things that they might not want to do. Their very niceness blinds them to the fact that they are being manipulated. Thus, they often get exploited and taken advantage of by other people. What's more, even if they become aware of the situation, people-pleasers will usually avoid confronting or criticizing the manipulator for fear of being viewed as “not nice.”

Button No. 3: Emotophobia  Fear of Negative Feelings

“Emotophobia” is a condition where a person suffers from an excessive or irrational fear of negative feelings, such as anger, aggression, or hostility. “Emotophobics” will go to almost any lengths to avoid anger, conflicts, and confrontation.

Manipulators have it easy with this people. All they have to do is use intimidation tactics or hint at a forthcoming episode of anger or hostility. Emotophobics will readily comply just to avoid anger or conflict from emerging.

The dangerous aspect about fearing negative emotions is that the longer people avoid dealing with them, the more threatening and uncontrollable they feel. Additionally, the more avoiding negative emotions, the more emotophobics become inept at dealing with them. What they do not realize is that conflict avoidance is not necessarily the hallmark of a good relationship. On the contrary, it is an indication of a serious problem and of poor communication.

Button No. 4: Lack of Assertiveness and the Ability to Say No

People-pleasers have trouble saying “no” to any request, expressed need, desire, invitation, or demand from nearly everyone. When they do say “no,” they often feel guilty or selfish for letting others down. Just the idea or possibility of saying no is enough to make them feel tensed and anxious; thus, making it easy for manipulators to control and exploit them.

Their inability to assert and say no is strongly connected to their aversion of negative emotions and desire to avoid conflict. However, their continuous “yes saying” only enslaves them further to the manipulative relationship. Eventually, their energy will run out, and they will cede more and more control of their lives to the manipulator.

Button No. 5: The Vanishing Self

People with “vanishing selves” have a blurry sense of their own identity. People with a diminished sense of self feel “invisible” and unsure of they are and what they stand for outside of the things that they do for others.
People whose identities are fuzzy and indistinct feel alienated from themselves and from others. At the same time, manipulative people tend to shape those with an indistinct or ambiguous sense of self according to the manipulator's needs and desires. Over time, the victim's own identity weakens and erodes making them highly vulnerable and a near-certain mark for manipulation.

**Button No. 6: Low Self-Reliance**
People who distrust their own judgment and abilities are dependent on others and are more prone to rely on the judgment and direction of others. They do not think much of themselves and are unable to exercise independence and autonomy in their decisions and relations with other people. Hence, people with low self-esteem are easy prey for manipulative individuals.

Often, people with low self-reliance have anxiety attacks whenever they are asked to make a decision, not to mention feeling insecure about their own abilities and skills. They tend to seek advice from others about any issue or topic, no matter how small or insignificant it is. Likewise, they have problems of sorting out and assimilating all those ideas and advice that they got from people that they tend to ask more people for further advice on how to interpret all those inputs.

**Button No. 7: External Locus of Control**
“Locus of control” (LOC) is a psychological phrase that refers to the idea of how or where you attribute the cause of things that happen, or fail to happen, to you. It reflects your life experiences and the ways in which you have been taught to understand and view the world. Thus, people who have an external LOC perceive the things that happen to them as being outside or beyond their control. In contrast, those who have an internal LOC believe that they have control on what happens to them.

Research shows that people with internal LOC have a higher self-esteem than those with external LOC, and therefore, are less likely to be manipulated. This enables them to make things happen and come to pass. On the other hand, those with external LOC lack this sense of mastery and are incapable of exercising the same degree of self-generated effort to direct their lives.

People with external LOC are also prone to depression because they have this learned helplessness mind-set where they believe that it is pointless to try and control, predict, prevent, minimize, or escape from the negative things that could happen to their lives. They feel powerless to change their lives. This is what makes them essentially vulnerable to manipulation.

**Profiling Manipulators**
Spotting a manipulator is not easy. Even if you are “on” to them, you may still find it hard to expose them for who and what they really are. Some are very crafty and skilled in hiding their true motives and intentions from others; while others seem to be unaware of their manipulative behavior towards other people. Nevertheless, regardless of whether a manipulator is conscious or not about his or her motives, the negative impact on the victim is basically the same.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**
Bestselling author Dr. Harriet B. Braiker was a practicing clinical psychologist and management consultant in Los Angeles/Beverly Hills and Pasadena, California, for more than 25 years. The author of many highly successful popular psychology books, she also authored numerous scholarly award-winning research books and other academic publications. Dr. Braiker was an internationally recognized authority on stress and women's issues who was always in great demand as a public speaker. She was a contributing editor and columnist for Working Woman and Lear's, and also wrote for many other national women's magazines. Frequently quoted in the media, Dr. Braiker appeared many times on such national talk shows as Oprah, The Today Show, Larry King, Live with Regis and Kathy Lee, Hour Magazine and Sonya Live, as well as on hard news shows such as NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw and CNN. She is frequently quoted as having said, “Striving for excellence motivates you; striving for perfection is demoralizing.”
The best way to stop a manipulator and to render their manipulations ineffective is to change your actions and behavior towards the manipulator. Avoid trying to change a manipulator. Besides, it is not even worthwhile to do so or to try pointing out to them their shortcomings and faults; although the degree to which manipulators are aware of their acts does have some bearing on their willingness to change.

Instead, pay attention to what they do or say. On top of that, stop rewarding their manipulative tactics by ceasing to cooperate, comply, please, or acquiesce to their whims and desires. When manipulative tactics stop being effective in advancing the manipulator's agenda, they will eventually disengage from the relationship or look for another mark or victim. Why? Because they do not want to have to work hard at manipulating their mark.

Similarly, manipulators operate from the viewpoint, consciously or unconsciously, that they are entitled to have their needs met and their purposes served. The manipulator who operates from this mind-set of entitlement believes that they are special and that they merit special compliance from others. Hence, they have difficulty comprehending the concept of violating the rights of others because they feel that others do not have rights of their own, and that they are entitled to have subordinates.

Furthermore, manipulators believe that other people also share their world-view, and given the choice other people will opt to be the manipulator than the manipulated. This tendency to project to other people their own views makes them incapable of acting in a trusting manner. Thus, a manipulator will always put a distrusting foot forward.

How Manipulators Look at the World
Manipulators believe that there are only two roles in a relationship: you are either the victim (i.e. the one being manipulated) or you are the one in power and control (i.e. the one doing the manipulating). This world-view prevents them from trusting other people and from participating in a relationship between equals, where there is a balance in the decision-making process and there is shared control. Such a relationship is beyond their comprehension.

Manipulators also believe that in life, there are winners and losers. They do not make room for a win-win or a lose-lose scenario. Manipulators would invariably want to be at the winning end; thus, they will do everything to make sure that there are more for them. This inevitably gives rise to competition, jealousy, and rivalry toxic emotions that taint and compromise the quality of a manipulator's relationship with other people.

Likewise, manipulators see other people as servants who exist to meet or satisfy their needs. This view allows no room for empathy. In fact, some manipulators cannot even fathom an alternative to this kind of “master-servant” relationship.

The Usual Suspects: Spotting Manipulators in your Midst
Anyone can be capable of manipulation, nevertheless, certain personality types are, by definition, more predisposed to be manipulative in their interactions and dealings with other people. Learning about these personality types will help you recognize the individuals who are likely to engage in manipulative behavior.

The Machiavellian Personality
This personality type is the poster child of manipulators. Machiavellian personalities (or “machs”) live by the rule that the end justifies the means. Their manipulative strategy of social interaction is one that uses other people as tools for personal gain.

They are often charming, confident, and glib. But they can also be arrogant, calculating, and cynical. People who are considered “high machs” often choose situations that are loosely structured and unencumbered by rules. They influence or manipulate others in very predictable ways, using tactics that are deceptive, self-serving, and nearly always destructive. People who are in a relationship with “machs” often feel angry and
resentful for having been used and manipulated.

**Narcissistic Personality Disorder**
People who have this personality disorder have an extremely inflated self-image and a strong sense of entitlement that make them insensitive to the needs and feelings of other people. Most people see them as arrogant, selfish, demanding, aloof, and cold. They have a pattern for grandiosity, a need to be admired, and a lack of empathy for others’ feelings.

Being “narcissistic,” these people highly expects special favors from others without necessarily reciprocating them. When a mark does not comply with his whims, they will often express anger and surprise. Thus, the only people who matter to “narcissists” are those who can satisfy their needs or enhance their self-image.

**Borderline Personality Disorder**
Borderline personalities are those who are characterized as highly unstable, who have fluctuating moods and self-images, and who have difficulty controlling their impulses. They are prone to fits of tantrums, to making threats, to giving the silent treatment, and to periods of frenzy. These characteristics of them often catch their mark off-balance and leave the mark vulnerable to manipulation, frequently feeling frustrated and angry at being manipulated that way.

Life, in general, is extremely intense and chaotic for “borderlines.” This being the case, they are terrified of being abandoned and will do anything to avoid separations. They become hypersensitive to rejections and they will lash out in eruptive anger whenever their sense of security is threatened. As such, they will usually employ “emotional blackmail” to get what they want. Being involved with a “borderline” is the same as being strapped to an emotional roller-coaster ride bound for endless cycles of chaos and drama. Although “borderlines” do not act out of malice but out of fear, loneliness, desperation, or even hopelessness the result is just the same.

**Dependent Personality Disorder**
Dependent personalities are needy, submissive, helpless, and incapable of functioning unless they are given constant nurturance, approval, reassurance, and emotional support by their marks. They are often childish in their ways and have trouble making decisions on their own; as a result, others tend to assume control and responsibilities over the lives of these individuals.

Dependent people become very anxious when they are left alone. They need others to tell them what to do. They will not express anger even when provoked because they are downright terrified of losing the guidance and care of other people; making them clingy and overly submissive.

Similar to “borderlines,” the manipulation of dependent people are not necessarily conscious, intentional, or planned. They manipulate people by playing to their submissiveness, helplessness, and neediness. Gender is also a factor in the manipulation. Dependent women tend to be submissive as a way to manipulate other people; whereas men tend to be pushy and demanding on those that they depend on.

**Histrionic Personality Disorder**
Histrionics are people who frequently overreact emotionally or sexually to situations. These individuals are attention seekers and excessively emotional, if not downright melodramatic. They are also vain and self-absorbed. They are likely to form superficial relationships only and their speech and emotional expressions are often not genuine.

Just like borderline and dependent personalities, histrionic individuals manipulates through evocation. Their most intrusive form of manipulation comes from their need to be the center of attention. They will try to upstage other people in a group to gain their attention or resort to excessive emotionality, such as crying or explosive outbursts, to manipulate others to pay attention even when people do not want to.

**Passive-Aggressive Personalities**
Passive-aggressive individuals manipulate and show their hostility through passive means, rather than through overt means. They usually procrastinate, dawdle, behave stubbornly, and intentionally forget things or act inefficiently. Their behavior usually evokes extreme frustration on other people, which translates to overt hostility later on. Eventually, people stop requesting or...
demanding things from these individuals to avoid getting frustrated and suffer the emotional cost of relying on them.

**Type A Angry Personalities**

Type A Angry personalities suffer from “hurry sickness.” They want to do more in less time. They are typically multi-taskers, highly competitive, and concerned more about quantitative measures of success than qualitative measures of life. They often become stressed and angry when something upsets their plans, delays their schedules, or when they lose control. Also, the same anger and stress they carry are what makes them susceptible to coronary artery disease.

Type A personalities directly manipulate others through explicit tactics of control; although they can indirectly manipulate others by evoking avoidance strategies among those who do not wish to become the object of their hostility. Consequently, people who work for them or with them typically tread carefully when in their presence to avoid upsetting them. This causes others to be stressed and anxious as well.

**The Con or the Anti-Social Personality Disorder**

Anti-social personalities characteristically live tumultuous lives. They are easily irritated and frustrated, not to mention aggressive when things don't go their way. They may engage in illegal activities, and tend to be reckless and blase of their own safety and that of others.

They are among the most manipulative and dangerous individuals that you can ever have the misfortune of meeting in life. They exhibit self-serving and arrogant personalities. They are also slick, charismatic, and smooth talkers, which they skillfully use to deceive and con people. Likewise, they do not develop a conscience. They do not feel any remorse when they trick or use people. Avoid them at all costs.

**Addictive Personalities**

Addicts manipulate others by their habits, interpersonal behavior patterns and maladaptive personality traits. The addict's extreme neediness evokes feelings of guilt, depression, humiliation, anger, frustration, uncertainty, low self-esteem, and other toxic emotions. Their bad habits and behavior often become highly detrimental to themselves, as well as to those who take care of them. Until they change, nothing anyone does will make a difference.

**The Mechanics of Manipulation**

Simply put, manipulators want one of two things from their marks: one, they want their marks to do something for them; and two, they want their marks to cease doing something. To accomplish this, manipulators must activate one (or both) of two principal human drives: gain and loss.

All manipulative relationships are propelled by the promise of gaining something of value and/or the threat of incurring a substantial loss. This is why some marks will sometimes willingly endure a manipulative relationship just so that they will get what they desire. Moreover, all manipulative relationships depend on certain control levers that manipulators use to hold out the promise of gain or the fear of loss or the means to avoid something that is undesirable.

Money, power, status, sex, love, acceptance, material gifts, and companionship are among the common control levers of the promise of gain. Whereas, the loss of a job, opportunity for advancement, the loss of rewards, fear of conflict, rejection, abandonment, failure, shame, criticism, and guilt are some of the control levers of loss, avoidance or fear. The point here is this: manipulators will utilize these control levers, plus a wide array of strategies and tactics that are all designed to elicit compliance from their marks.

**The Impact of Manipulation**

The often coercive nature of manipulation, as well as its propensity to produce anxiety, creates toxic feelings that take a substantial toll on the victim's emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Also, victims of manipulation are confused about the real desires and motivations of manipulators. They often do not understand the true nature of the manipulative dynamics in which they find
themselves in, and as long as the real agenda of the manipulator is kept hidden, these toxic patterns of living will persist.

The manipulator creates mounting frustration and eventual hostility in the victim or mark by controlling and limiting communication. Gradually, and because there is no outlet available to the victim to express their frustrations and anger, these toxic feelings become internalized and ultimately cause great emotional harm, as well as mental and physical harm, to the person. Plus, the victim gets trapped in a self-image of victimization. The more victimized they feel, the less chance of them of being able to break free from the toxic relationship.

Regaining Control of Your Life

To break free of the manipulative bind that you have found yourself in, you need to trust and rely on your ability to reclaim control of your life. You cannot really depend on anyone else, much less on the manipulator himself/herself. You need to get rid of the negative emotions that your victimization has induced and perpetuated.

To do this, you first need to make a leap of faith and decide to trust again in yourself because no one else will do it for you. You are the main agent of change in your life. Do not worry about changing the manipulator. Focus on changing yourself. Keep in mind that manipulation only works if you continuously feed it with your compliance and capitulation. Hence, to effectively thwart a manipulator and to regain your self-esteem, change your responses to the manipulator's tactics.

You could either resist the pressure being exerted on you by the manipulator or you could remove yourself from the manipulative relationship. When you use resistance tactics, you shift the balance of power in the relationship. You must realize that by shifting the balance of power, changes in the way you and the manipulator behave will transpire. Also, be prepared to undergo some rocky adjustment period. Do not be afraid of these changes. They are necessary risks.

However, there are times when resisting the manipulator will not bring about the results you intended. When this happens, it is better for you to remove yourself from the manipulative relationship and severe whatever ties you may have formed. Continuing with a relationship that mandates manipulation and compliance is simply not good for you. Remaining a victim of manipulation, diminishing your self-respect, and losing your self-esteem are too high a price to pay for holding onto such a relationship. Besides, if your unwillingness to be manipulated costs you a relationship, what did you really have in the first place?

There are certain instances when extraction or a dramatic personality change may not offer the best solution to your problem. Such relationships include those that you have with your family or relatives, or those where your livelihood and long-term career options depend on. In such cases, you may need to make some sacrifices and certain adjustments to your plans to prevent losing the relationship.

When such is the scenario, it is better if you use small-scale resistance tactics instead. This way you get to improve the way you feel about yourself, while protecting your family relations, job, or livelihood at the same time. Though you only get to regain your autonomy and self-esteem bit by bit, you are at least on the way to regaining control of your life. The bottom line is, you should choose your battles carefully and wisely. Be flexible when the situation asks for it. Nevertheless, never weaken at any stage of your efforts to change or return to becoming the helpless mark of a manipulator. Be courageous and stay committed to your intention of breaking free of manipulation.
Who’s Pulling Your Strings? April 5, 2013 By George Hutton Last update: April 5, 2013 Leave a Comment. Which is more important, nurture or nature? Nor does it help when politicians, religious organizations and other “authority” figures seduce us against our conscious best interests by appealing to our “animal natures.” One powerful skill you can learn when studying NLP is to “dissociate” from any given situation, and figure out the best course of action, regardless of what your emotions are screaming. Freeze time for a moment, and step outside your body. Look out into your future, and see what it looks like based on what you’re choosing to do. Which decisions now would give you the best future. In Who’s Pulling Your Strings?, Dr. Harriet B. Braiker, New York Times bestselling author of The Disease to Please, explains how depression, low self-esteem, anger, and feelings of helplessness can be caused by relationships with manipulative people. She exposes the most common methods of manipulators, and with the help of self-assessment quizzes, action plans, and how-to exercises, she helps you recognize and end the manipulative cycle for good. Harriet Braiker, author of Who’s Pulling Your Strings? Dr. George K. Simon, a clinical psychologist and world-renown expert on manipulators, others with disturbed personalities, and their victims, cite three requirements for successful manipulation: (1) Concealing aggressive behaviors and intentions. (2) Understanding the psychological shortcomings of a victim in determining which method will best achieve desired results. (3) An uncommon degree of ruthlessness; having no apprehension about inflicting harm upon an unknowing victim. Frequently, due to the clever techniques manipulators use,