



Coercion in Relationships

Persuasion & Influence · Tier 2 · Component 6 — instructor overview

Grades: 9–10 **Time:** ~50 min **Format:** reading, then individual; share only what's comfortable

Everyone influences the people they're close to — that's normal. The line to watch is **choice**: healthy influence makes its case and can hear "no"; coercion works to make "no" feel impossible. This component teaches students to recognize the patterns — and to name what respect actually looks like.

WHAT STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO DO

- State the single line between influence and coercion: whether it respects your ability to say no.
- Recognize **obligation engineering**, **rushed false intimacy**, and **shame or exclusion threats**.
- Describe what healthy influence sounds like by contrast.
- Identify trusted people and supports to turn to.

WHY IT MATTERS

This is the most sensitive component in the tier, and the most important. The levers from earlier — obligation, identity, sunk cost — get turned into control in personal relationships, and adolescence is when many students first meet them. The goal is recognition and self-respect, not fear or diagnosis.

Hold it carefully: we name *patterns of behavior*, not people, and slowing down, saying no, and asking for help are always options. Some students may recognize these patterns from their own lives — read the support note aloud before you begin, and be ready to follow your school's protocol.

PACING

SEGMENT	TIME	WHAT HAPPENS
Set the frame	5 min	Influence respects choice; coercion removes it. Patterns, not people.
Reading	10–12 min	Read the Student pages; the Sam & Riley scenario.
Sort the patterns	12–15 min	Activity Parts A–B.
Keep your "no" & supports	10 min	Activity Parts C–D.
Debrief	8–10 min	Discussion prompts; close on the support note (Instructor p. 4).

MATERIALS

The 4 Student pages per student or pair. Preview the scenarios for your class first.



Coercion in Relationships

The mechanism in depth — part 1 of 2

Persuasion and coercion differ on one axis: **choice**. Healthy influence makes a case and leaves you free to say no; coercion works to make "no" feel impossible, or too costly to be a real option. In close relationships the same levers from earlier in the tier — obligation, identity, sunk cost — get repurposed as control. The running example is a composite: **Sam and Riley**, whose relationship shows the patterns without portraying any one real person.

OBLIGATION ENGINEERING: MANUFACTURED DEBT

Favors, gifts, and reminders of "everything I've done for you" are stockpiled and then cashed in: "after all this, you owe me." Ordinary kindness becomes a lever, and the sunk-cost feeling of a long relationship gets used to justify staying past what's healthy (sunk-cost commitment) — "we've been together too long for you to leave now." With Sam and Riley, Riley keeps a running tally: the gift, the ride, the time spent — each produced later as proof that Sam is in debt and therefore can't refuse.

FALSE INTIMACY: RUSHED CLOSENESS

Intense, fast bonding — "no one else understands me like you," secrets and huge declarations early, "it's you and me against everyone" — lowers guard before trust has actually been earned, and builds an in-group of two whose private rules feel exempt from outside checks (in-group favoritism). Riley pushes closeness fast and discourages Sam's other friendships, so that Sam has fewer outside perspectives to measure the relationship against. Isolation isn't a side effect here; it's part of the method.



Coercion in Relationships

The mechanism in depth — part 2 of 2

SHAME & EXCLUSION THREATS: CUTTING OFF THE EXITS

"If you really cared, you would." "Everyone will think you're awful." "Fine, then we're done." Guilt, threatened embarrassment, and the fear of being cut off push compliance by making refusal feel like losing the relationship or one's standing — loss aversion aimed at belonging itself (loss aversion). Each threat narrows the sense that "no" is even available. When Riley responds to any boundary with withdrawal or an ultimatum, Sam learns that keeping the relationship requires giving up the right to refuse — which is the definition of coercion.

WHAT HEALTHY INFLUENCE SOUNDS LIKE

The contrast is the whole lesson. Healthy influence can hear "no," "not yet," or "let me think" *without punishment*. It makes a case and accepts that you might decline. It keeps a tab of nothing. It welcomes your other relationships rather than fencing them off. Naming this out loud matters, because students who only study the dark version can start reading ordinary disagreement as abuse. The point is a clear line, not universal suspicion.

TWO THINGS TO KEEP REPEATING

Respect leaves room for no. The one reliable test is whether a person can accept your "no" without making you pay for it. **Patterns, not people.** We're naming behaviors so students can recognize them early — and a single bad moment is not the same as a pattern. Close every session on the support note.

Support note (read aloud): If any of these patterns feel familiar — in any relationship — it isn't your fault, and you don't have to handle it alone. Talk with a trusted adult, a school counselor, or another safe person.



Coercion in Relationships

Discussion guide — modular; assemble to fit your period

These blocks are timed so you can build a lesson from them: a single period, or a full unit day. Run the activity with an opener before and a debrief after — pick what fits.

TIME BUDGET — MIX AND MATCH

BLOCK	TIME	USE
Opener (before)	5–8 min	Pick one, below.
Activity	18–20 min	The student pages.
Debrief (after)	~5 min each	Pick 1–2 prompts.
Close	3 min	The takeaway.

Single period: opener + activity + one debrief + close. **Full lesson:** opener + activity + two or three debriefs + an extension.

BEFORE — THE OPENER (PICK ONE · 5–8 MIN)

FORMAT: think-pair-share or a quick hands-up. GOAL: surface what students already notice and pose the question. END RESULT: every student has committed to a prediction or named a real example you can return to in the debrief.

- **Predict.** Ask (no personal sharing needed): what's one sign someone respects your "no"? Connect a few to the reading.
- **From their world.** Keep examples general — draw on stories, shows, or hypotheticals rather than personal disclosures.

THE ACTIVITY (BUDGET 18–20 MIN)

CONCRETE GOAL — STUDENTS CAN: tell healthy influence from coercion with one test — can they hear "no" without punishing you?

AFTER — THE DEBRIEF (PICK 1–2 · ~5 MIN EACH)

FORMAT: whole-class; call on the examples students generated in the opener and activity. END RESULT: students can state the takeaway in their own words and back it with one concrete example from their own life or the activity.

- What is the one thing that separates healthy influence from coercion?
- What are calm ways to keep your "no" with anyone?

CLOSE (3 MIN)

Have a few students state the takeaway in their own words: **Real respect can hear "no." Control works to make "no" impossible.**

Close on the support note: if any of these patterns feel familiar, it isn't your fault — talk to a trusted adult, a counselor, or another safe person.



Coercion in Relationships

Leading the discussion — pacing, redirects, and warm-ups

The previous page is the plan; this page is for running it. Budget the period from the total below, and keep the redirect moves handy — most discussions falter in one of these four ways.

DOES IT FIT THE PERIOD?

ONE PERIOD (~45–50 MIN): opener 6 + activity 18–20 + one debrief 5 + close 3 = **32–34 min.** BLOCK (~90 MIN): add two more debriefs and a differentiation extension from the facilitation page.

WHEN DISCUSSION STALLS OR DERAILS

IF...	MOVE
Silence, or “I don’t know”	Shrink the question: “Just name the first thing you noticed.” Give 30 seconds of silent think-time, then call on a pair, not an individual.
One or two voices dominate	“Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t gone yet.” Run it as think-pair-share first, so every student has an answer ready to offer.
It turns personal or heated	Move the trial from the person to the message: “What in the text makes you say that?” Keep the claim on trial, never the classmate.
Answers stay on the surface	Push for evidence: “Where exactly — quote the line.” Then “What would change your mind?” to surface the reasoning underneath.

WARM-UP BANK (SWAP IN FOR ANY OPENER)

Interchangeable with the opener on the previous page. Vary them across a unit so the hook stays fresh.

- **Two-minute hunt.** Find one real example of today’s move on your phone right now; keep the best one for the debrief.
- **Steelman it.** What’s the most honest reason someone would use this technique? Persuasion isn’t always dishonest — name the legitimate version first.
- **Rate and defend.** Put one message on the board; everyone rates it 1–5 for how persuasive, then defends the spread of answers.
- **Odd one out.** Three short examples, one isn’t the move — which, and how can you tell?



Coercion in Relationships

Facilitation, anticipated moves & answer key

ANTICIPATED STUDENT RESPONSES & MISCONCEPTIONS

- **"So any pressure means it's abusive."** No — people who care disagree and push sometimes. The line is whether they can accept your no. Keep returning to that test.
- **Students personalizing.** Some will recognize their own lives. Don't require sharing; allow written or private responses; know your referral path before you start.
- **"If you loved someone you'd do anything for them."** Gently separate care from compliance: love doesn't require surrendering your right to choose.
- **Reading one bad day as a pattern.** Emphasize repetition — coercion is a *pattern* of behavior, not a single argument or bad mood.

DIFFERENTIATION & EXTENSIONS

Support: offer sentence starters for the "keep your no" responses. **Stretch:** students write a short scene showing the same request made in a healthy way and a coercive way, then annotate the difference. Keep all examples fictional or general. **Cross-curricular:** health/SEL standards on healthy relationships; consent and boundaries.

ANSWER KEY — ACTIVITY

ITEM	SAMPLE RESPONSE
A1 "I disagree, but it's your call"	<i>Healthy — leaves room for your choice.</i>
A2 "after everything I've done, you owe me"	<i>Coercive — obligation engineering.</i>
A3 "don't tell your friends — they wouldn't get it"	<i>Coercive — isolation / false intimacy.</i>
A4 "take your time — no pressure"	<i>Healthy.</i>
A5 "if you really cared, you'd just say yes"	<i>Coercive — guilt / shame.</i>

Close on the support note. Remind students where to turn if any of this felt familiar.



Coercion in Relationships

Influence that respects you vs. control that doesn't

Sam and Riley have been together a while. Lately, every time Sam wants to do something on their own — see other friends, say no to a plan — Riley has an answer ready. "After everything I've done for you?" "If you actually cared, you wouldn't even ask." "Fine. I guess we're done, then." Sam keeps giving in, not because Riley made a good case, but because saying no now costs the whole relationship. That's the line we're learning to see.

Everyone influences the people they're close to — that's completely normal. The thing to watch is **choice**. Healthy influence makes its case and can hear "no." Coercion works to make "no" feel impossible, too guilty, or too expensive. Here are the patterns.

OBLIGATION ENGINEERING: KINDNESS TURNED INTO A BILL

Favors and gifts get counted up and cashed in later: "after everything I've done for you, you owe me this." In a long relationship, "we've been together so long" gets used to justify staying past what feels okay. Riley keeps a running tally — the gift, the ride, the time — and produces it as proof that Sam can't refuse. But real care doesn't keep a tab, and time already spent isn't a reason to give up your choices now.

RUSHED CLOSENESS: TOO MUCH, TOO FAST

Very fast, very intense bonding — "no one understands me like you," secrets and huge declarations early, "it's you and me against everyone" — can lower your guard before trust is actually earned, and quietly pull you away from other people who'd give you perspective. Riley pushes closeness fast and nudges Sam away from other friends. That isn't an accident: fewer outside voices means fewer people to help Sam see the pattern.



Coercion in Relationships

Cutting off the exits — and keeping your "no"

SHAME & EXCLUSION THREATS

"If you really cared, you'd do it." "Everyone will think you're terrible." "Fine, then we're done." Guilt, embarrassment, and the threat of being cut off make refusing feel like losing the relationship itself — so you go along to keep it. Every time Riley meets a boundary with an ultimatum or the silent treatment, Sam learns the same lesson: keeping the relationship means giving up the right to say no. That trade is exactly what coercion is.

WHAT RESPECT ACTUALLY SOUNDS LIKE

Here's the contrast, and it's the whole point. Someone who respects you can hear "no," "not yet," or "let me think about it" *without punishing you for it*. They make their case and accept that you might say no. They don't keep a tab. They're glad you have other friends, not threatened by them. Disagreement and even pressure can happen in a healthy relationship — the test isn't whether someone ever pushes, it's whether they can take your no without making you pay for it.

THE TEST, AND A REMINDER

One question sorts most of it: **can this person hear "no" without punishing me for it?** If keeping someone in your life requires giving up your right to choose, that's not closeness — it's control. You never owe a reason for a no, and "let me think about it" is a complete answer.

If any of these patterns feel familiar — in any relationship — it isn't your fault, and you don't have to handle it alone. Talk with a trusted adult, a school counselor, or another safe person.



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Name: _____ Date: _____

The test: Can they hear "no" without punishing you for it? Real respect leaves room for your choice.

PART A — HEALTHY OR COERCIVE?

Mark each **H** (healthy) or **C** (coercive), and name the pattern if it's coercive.

WHAT THEY SAY OR DO	H / C · PATTERN
1. "I disagree, but it's your call."	
2. "After everything I've done, you owe me this."	
3. "Don't tell your friends about us — they wouldn't get it."	
4. "Take your time deciding — no pressure."	
5. "If you really cared about me, you'd just say yes."	

PART B — WHAT RESPECT SOUNDS LIKE

Rewrite line 5 so it makes the same request *without* coercion.



PART C — KEEP YOUR "NO"

Write a calm response to each that keeps your choice. You never owe a reason.

To "After everything I've done, you owe me."

To "If you really cared, you'd do it."

To "Don't tell anyone — it's just us."

PART D — YOUR PEOPLE

List two people you could talk to if a relationship ever felt like the coercive patterns above. (A friend, family member, counselor, coach, or another trusted adult.)

Remember: If any of these patterns feel familiar — in any relationship — it isn't your fault, and you don't have to handle it alone. Talk with a trusted adult, a school counselor, or another safe person.