Red Flag Project

VADEMECUM

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A practical guide to recognising warning signs in relationships

At sea, a red flag means stop.
The same rule should apply in relationships.
This guide is designed to help people recognise controlling, isolating, manipulative, belittling and coercive behaviours before they can escalate into something more serious.
If these behaviours are directed at you, recognising them can help you put a name to what is happening.
If you display these behaviours, recognising them can help you look at them more consciously and begin to question them.
Recognising them means learning not to accept them as normal.



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RED FLAGS TO RECOGNISE



Red Flag #1

Control disguised as affection

The phrase:

"Send me your position when you get there." / "Who were you with?"
21.11

The behaviour:

Constantly demanding proof, checking someone's devices or monitoring their location.
21.11

The reality:

This is not protection; it is monitoring. Love is based on trust, not surveillance.
21.11

If you do this

If you constantly demand to know where your partner is or who they are with, you are exercising control over their freedom. Recognise this and question it.

If this happens to you

If someone insists on always knowing where you are or who you are with, this is not a demonstration of love. It is a form of control.

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RECOGNISE A RED FLAG — EVEN WHEN YOU ARE THE ONE DISPLAYING IT.

Red Flag #2

Progressive isolation

The phrase:

"If you really loved me, you wouldn't go out with them." 21.11

The behaviour:

Trying to distance someone from friends, colleagues or family members by making them feel guilty. 21.11

The reality:

This is a strategy that undermines your safety and makes you dependent on the other person's judgement. 21.11

If you do this

If you try to distance the other person from friends, colleagues or family, this is not protection. It is a way of controlling their independence.

If this happens to you

If someone tries to distance you from the people who are part of your life, they are not protecting you. They are limiting your freedom. Isolation is not a form of care; it is a way of exercising control.

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RECOGNISE A RED FLAG — EVEN WHEN YOU ARE THE ONE DISPLAYING IT.

Red Flag #3

Gaslighting

The phrase:

"You imagined it." 21.11

The behaviour:

Systematically denying or rewriting what happened, causing the other person to doubt their perceptions, memories or emotions. 21.11

The reality:

Making someone doubt their own perception does not resolve a conflict; it gradually undermines their self-confidence. 21.11

If you do this

If you repeatedly deny what you have said or done and tell the other person they imagined it, you are leading them to doubt their memories.

If this happens to you

If you are often told "you imagined it", you may start doubting even what you have seen or heard. Your experience deserves to be taken seriously.

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RECOGNISE A RED FLAG — EVEN WHEN YOU ARE THE ONE DISPLAYING IT.

Red Flag #4

Belittling and humiliation

The phrase:

"You're nothing without me." /."You don't understand." 21.11

The behaviour:

Constantly criticizing, mocking, insulting, humiliating someone, or systematically making them feel that their abilities and achievements are worth less. 21.11

The reality:

Someone who loves you supports you and celebrates your successes; they do not undermine your worth. 21.11

If you do this

If you ridicule the other person's ideas, play down their achievements or repeatedly tell them they are worthless without you, you are humiliating them — even if you say you are joking.

If this happens to you

If the person you are with keeps telling you that you do not understand or mocks what you do, you may start believing them. Your worth does not depend on their judgement.

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RECOGNISE A RED FLAG — EVEN WHEN YOU ARE THE ONE DISPLAYING IT.

Red Flag #5

Blame-shifting

The phrase:

"If you hadn't done that, I wouldn't have reacted this way." / "You make me act like this." 21.11

The behaviour:

Making the other person feel responsible for your outbursts, jealousy or the distress in the relationship. 21.11

The reality:

Blaming another person for one's own reactions is a way of justifying one's behaviour and shifting responsibility. Everyone is responsible for their own actions. 21.11

If you do this

If, after shouting at the other person, you tell them they provoked you, you are blaming them for your actions. You are responsible for how you react.

If this happens to you

If the person you are with tells you that it is your fault they insulted or threatened you, they are shifting responsibility for their actions onto you. That responsibility is theirs.

Type here...

RECOGNISE A RED FLAG — EVEN WHEN YOU ARE THE ONE DISPLAYING IT.

IF YOU RECOGNISE THESE BEHAVIOURS IN THE WAY OTHERS TREAT YOU



Do you recognise a red flag in the way someone treats you?

It can be difficult to recognise behaviour that hurts you, especially when it comes from someone you love, trust or who plays an important role in your life. You may justify it, think you caused it or hope it will change. Paying attention to what happens and how it affects your everyday life can help you understand the situation and seek support.

Here are five situations you can start with.



#1 Control disguised as affection

Someone expects you to reply immediately, checks your online activity or asks you to send photos or share your location to know where you are.

The thought to question:
“If I have nothing to hide, I can prove it to them” or “Couples should tell each other everything.”
Your privacy is a right. You do not have to give it up to prove you are being honest.

What you can do: Notice whether you are free to choose when to reply and what to share, or whether you do so because you fear the other person’s reaction. Tell someone you trust about a specific incident. If you think your phone is being monitored, seek support using a device the other person cannot access.

What to work on: Distinguishing what you choose to share from what you share only to avoid tension.

#2 Progressive isolation

A family member, friend or someone close to you criticises the people you spend time with or makes you feel guilty when you meet others. To avoid arguments, you begin giving up social plans and activities.

The thought to question: *"To keep this relationship, I have to give up these people."*
You can maintain different relationships, interests and connections without having to prove your commitment by giving up everyone else.

What you can do: Think about the people you used to see and the activities you have stopped doing. Choose someone you trust to reconnect with in a way that feels safe. You could start with a simple sentence: "We haven't been in touch much because some of my relationships have become a source of arguments. I'd like to tell you what's been happening."

What to work on: Recognising when you give something up because you want to, and when you do it to avoid the other person's reaction.

#3 Gaslighting

You remember words or behaviour that hurt you. The other person repeatedly denies what happened and makes you doubt your memory or your ability to understand the situation.

The thought to question: *"If they keep denying it, maybe I can't trust myself."*
Someone denying that an incident happened does not mean you imagined it.

What you can do: If it is safe to do so, write down what happened, the words you remember and how you felt. Keep this information somewhere the other person cannot access. Talk to someone you trust or a specialist service: you can seek support even if the other person refuses to acknowledge what happened.

What to work on: Valuing what you remember and feel, even when someone else tells the story differently.

#4 Belittling and humiliation

Someone puts down your ideas, achievements or abilities, even in front of friends, family or colleagues. When you say it upsets you, they respond that it was only a joke.

A thought to question: *"Maybe I'm too sensitive."*
Your distress deserves to be heard, even when the other person claims they meant something different.

What you can do: Pay attention to the words used and the context in which they are said. Tell someone who will listen and take the situation seriously about a specific incident. If you fear the other person's reaction, seek support before deciding whether and how to talk to them.

What to work on: Distinguishing a comment about a specific fact from a judgement that questions your worth, intelligence or abilities.

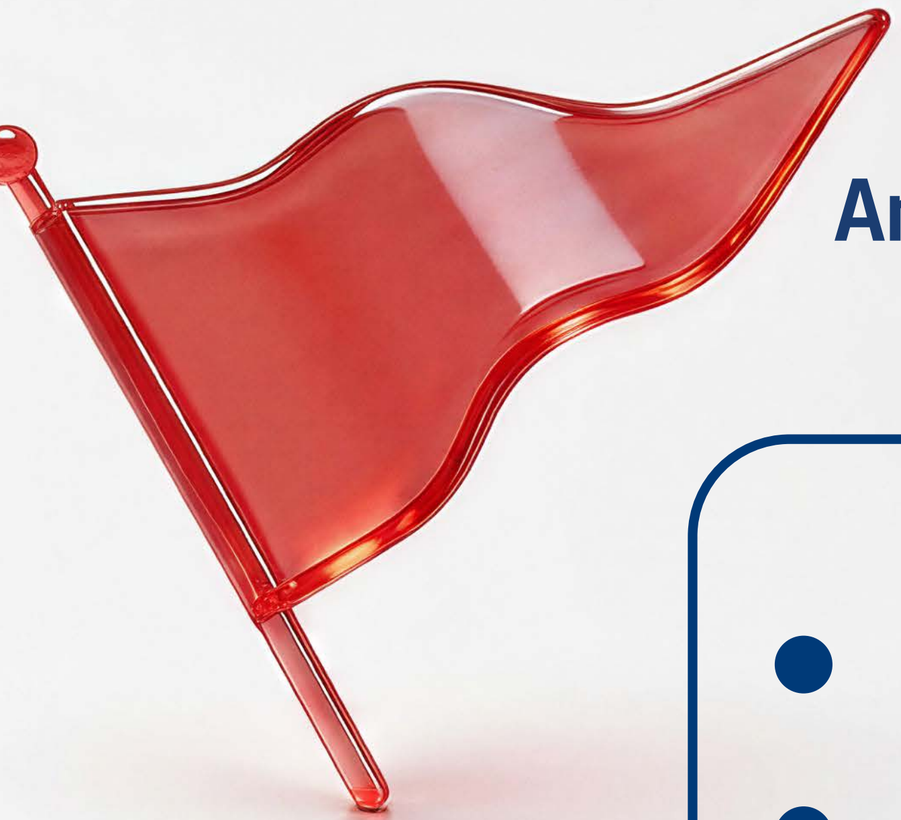
#5 Blame-shifting

Someone raises their voice, uses offensive language or makes threats, then tells you: "If you hadn't done that, I wouldn't have reacted this way."

A thought to question: *"If I find the right words and avoid making them angry, they'll stop."*
Your words and choices do not make you responsible for the other person's behaviour.

What you can do: Separate the facts: there may have been a disagreement, but the person who uses offensive language or makes threats is responsible for doing so. If you feel in danger, prioritise your safety. You can tell someone you trust what is happening and contact a specialist service to work out the next steps together.

What to work on: Recognising when you take responsibility for the other person's actions or constantly change what you do to prevent their reactions.



An exercise to get started

If it is safe to do so, after an incident write down:

- What happened, describing specific words and actions
- How you experienced that moment and what you changed to avoid tension with the other person
- Who you can talk to and what kind of support might be useful

Notice whether you feel free in your relationships to express yourself, maintain your connections and make your own choices. Talking to someone can help even when you are still unsure or do not know how to deal with the situation.

IF YOU RECOGNISE THESE BEHAVIOURS IN YOURSELF



Have you recognised a red flag in your own behaviour?

It can be difficult to recognise that you have controlled, belittled or made someone feel guilty. Becoming aware of it is the first step towards change. The next step is to identify what you do and practise responding differently, even when you feel anger, jealousy or fear. It may also help to work out who you can talk to and what support could be useful.

Here are five **situations you can start with:**



#1 Control disguised as affection



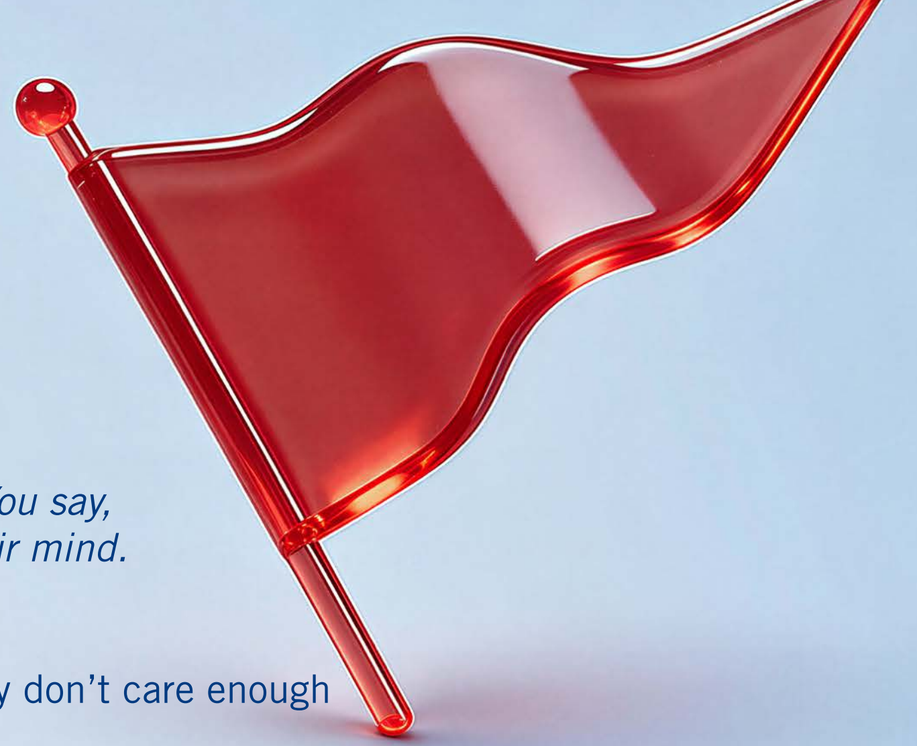
Someone does not reply. You check their last-seen status, call repeatedly or ask them to send a photo to prove where they are.

The thought to question: “If they don’t reply, they must be hiding something from me.” The fact is that they have not replied. Everything else is your interpretation.

What you can do: Stop repeatedly calling and checking up on them. When you are back in contact, avoid persistent questioning and demands for proof. If you have access to their accounts or location, stop using that access to monitor them. Talk to a friend, a relationship professional or a local CIPM support centre.

What to work on: Accepting that you cannot know everything, without turning your worries into an obligation for the other person.

#2 Progressive isolation



Someone close to you wants to meet other friends or take part in an activity without you. You say, "You prefer them to me", start an argument or show disapproval to make them change their mind.

The thought to question: "If they want to spend time with other people, it means they don't care enough about me." Every relationship can include independent friendships and interests.

What you can do: Respect their plans. Avoid pressure, repeated messages or reproaches afterwards. Make your own plans without asking them to give up theirs. You can suggest spending time together another day, accepting that they may say no. Talk to a friend, a relationship professional or a local CIPM support centre.

What to work on: Respecting someone's choice even when you would have preferred something different.

#3 Gaslighting



Someone tells you: "What you said hurt me." You reply, "I never said that", even though you know you did, or "You always imagine things."

The thought to question: "To defend myself, I have to prove the other person is wrong."

What you can do: Acknowledge what you said or did without changing their account to justify yourself: "I said that. It was hurtful, and I take responsibility for it." If you genuinely do not remember, say so without questioning the other person: "I don't remember saying those words, but that doesn't mean you made them up." Listen without asking them to take back what they have told you.
Talk to a friend, a relationship professional or a local CIPM support centre.

What to work on: Recognising your behaviour even when admitting it makes you uncomfortable.

#4 Belittling and humiliation



During a disagreement, you say "You don't understand anything", or you tell something in front of others to make someone look bad.

The thought to question: "If I think they've done something wrong, I'm entitled to treat them like this."

What you can do: Stop making offensive comments and focus on the specific issue. Instead of saying "You're incapable of organising anything", you could say: "We agreed on eight o'clock and it's nine. I'd like to understand how we can organise things." If you have already belittled someone, acknowledge it: "I made a comment about your abilities in front of others. I was wrong." Do not justify it as a joke or expect immediate forgiveness. Talk to a friend, a relationship professional or a local CIPM support centre.

What to work on: Recognising your behaviour even when admitting it makes you uncomfortable.

#5 Blame-shifting

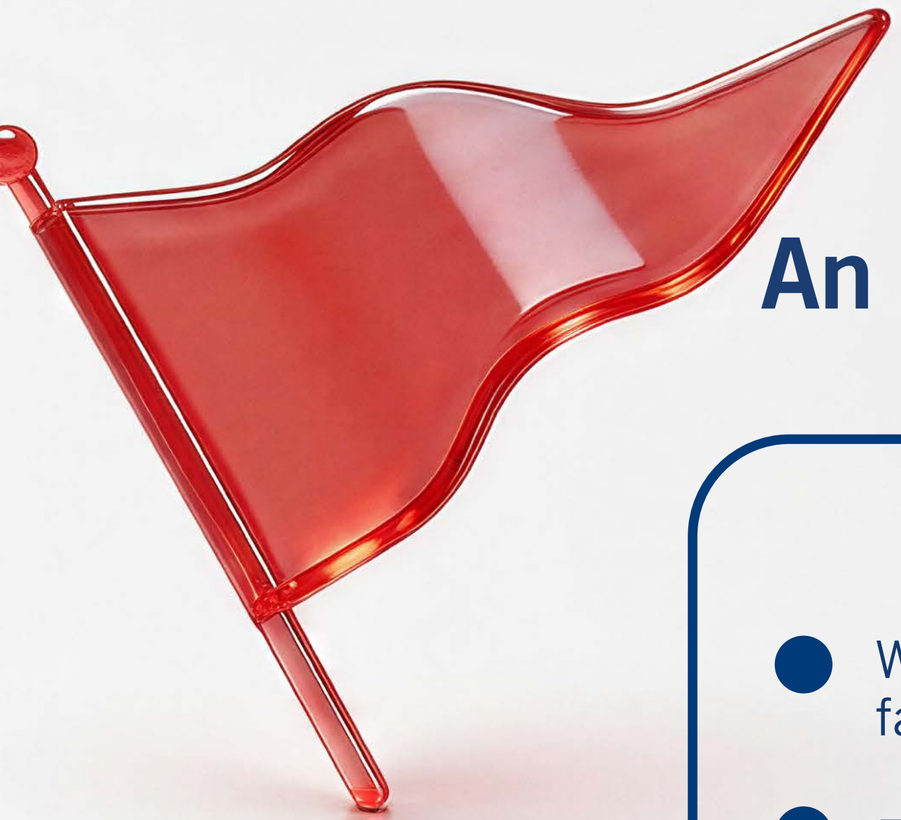


You have raised your voice or used offensive language and then say: "You made me lose my temper."

The thought to question: "What I feel makes my behaviour unavoidable."

What you can do: Separate the emotion from the action: "I was angry and I raised my voice. That is my responsibility." Identify the signs that come before your behaviour: your tone changes, you feel tension in your body, or you start thinking "They have to listen to me now." When you notice these signs, stop the discussion and take some space, without following the other person or preventing them from leaving. Resume the conversation only if the other person is also willing. Talk to a friend, a relationship professional or a local CIPM support centre.

What to work on: Recognising these signs earlier and stopping, without waiting for the other person to change before you regain your calm.



An exercise to get started

After an incident, write down:

- What happened, distinguishing facts from your interpretations
- Exactly what you did
- What different action you could take next time

Pay attention to your behaviour over time.
Change becomes visible when you stop monitoring, belittling or pressuring someone,
even when they do not do what you want.

IF YOU RECOGNISE THESE BEHAVIOURS IN OTHER PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIPS



Start with what you have observed

You may wonder whether to intervene or think that these are private matters. You can offer a listening ear, pay attention to what you observe and help the person find out about the support available, while respecting their choices and safety.

If you speak to the person experiencing the behaviour, you could say:

"I noticed you received a lot of calls during the break and seemed worried. How are you?"

"Earlier I heard comments that put down your abilities. If you want to talk about it, I'm here."

If you speak to the person displaying the behaviour, you could say:

"I've noticed that you often ask where they are and check their location. How are you feeling at the moment?"

"I've seen that when they go out with friends, you raise your voice and respond aggressively. Would you like to talk about it?"

If they shut down or play it down, leave the door open:
"I'm not here to judge you, but what I've seen worries me. If you want to talk about it, I'm here."

Listen without judging

Let the person tell their story in their own words.
Avoid questions such as “Why do you let them treat you like that?” or comments such as “I would never have put up with that.” These can make the person feel judged and make it harder for them to ask for support.

If you speak to the person experiencing the behaviour, you could say:

“What you’re telling me deserves attention.”

“You are not responsible for the way the other person chooses to behave.”

“What do you need right now?”

If you speak to the person displaying the behaviour, you could say:

“I’m listening. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I understand this is a difficult time, but it doesn’t justify the way you are behaving.”

“How do you think the other person feels?”

Avoid justifying statements such as “You do it because you care”or “You reacted to a provocation.”

Offer practical help without making decisions for them

You could suggest looking for a service together, accompany the person to an appointment or stay with them while they ask for information.

Before calling or messaging, ask what time and channel are safe: their phone and messages may be monitored. Do not share their story with friends or colleagues without their consent, and do not arrange a confrontation with the person displaying the behaviour: this could expose them to further risks.

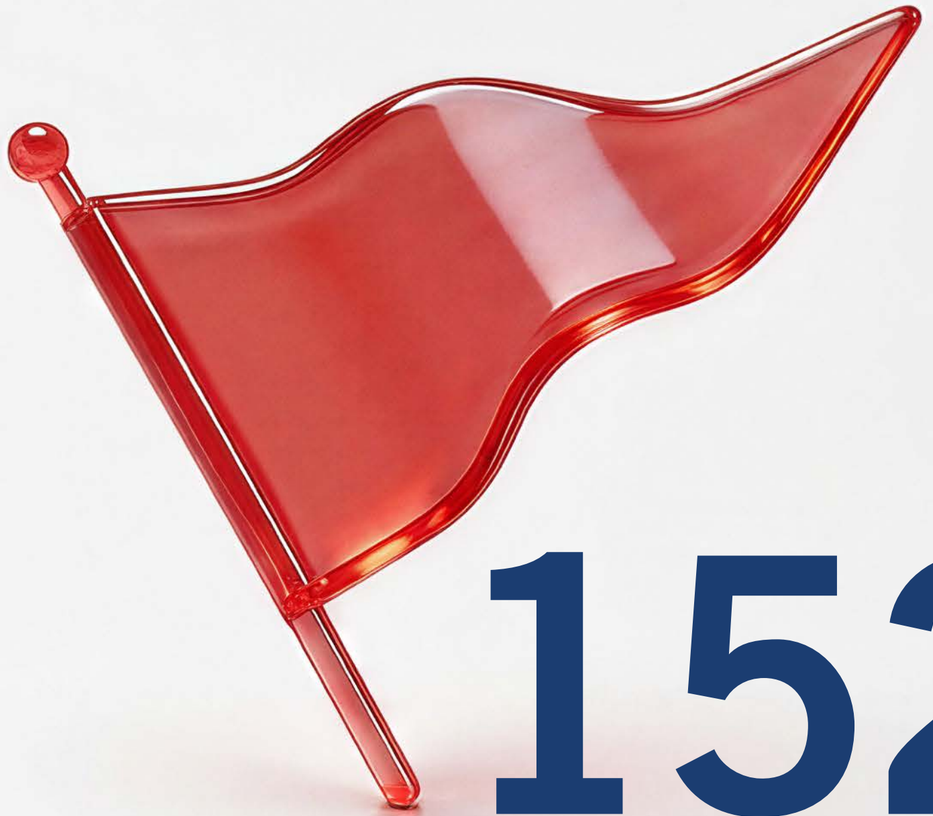
Stay in touch even if they are not ready to take action or make decisions you disagree with.



Help the person connect with support services

If someone tells you about a situation involving control or behaviour that limits their freedom and well-being, help them find out which services they can turn to. You can look up contact details together and offer support with the first step, while respecting their timing and choices.





SUPPORT SERVICES AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN ITALY

1522

Specialist listening and guidance

You can suggest that a woman experiencing violence or stalking contact 1522, even just to ask for advice. The service is free, operates every day, 24 hours a day, and is available in several languages.

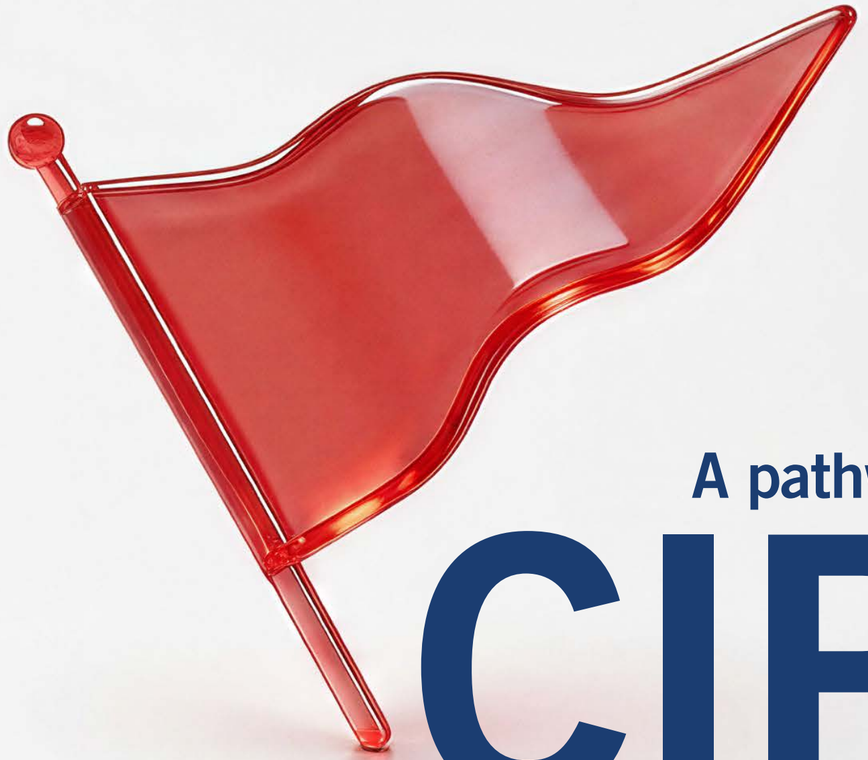
The 1522 helpline offers support and guidance towards anti-violence centres and local services. It can also be accessed through the chat on the 1522.eu website.

If she wishes, you can stay with her while she calls or help her access the chat, making sure she can do so safely.

Help the person connect with behaviour-change services

If someone tells you they are finding it difficult to stop monitoring the person they are in a relationship with, you can help them identify services they can contact to change their behaviour.
You can look up contact details together and encourage them to take the first step, without justifying what they are doing.





SUPPORT SERVICES AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN ITALY

A pathway to change

CIPM

You can suggest that anyone who recognises that they display controlling, belittling or violent behaviour in relationships contact CIPM – Italian Centre for the Promotion of Mediation.

CIPM offers individual and group programmes to help people recognise and change these behaviours. It also welcomes people who come forward on their own initiative.

CIPM operates in several Italian regions. You can help the person find the nearest centre and, if they wish, make the first contact.

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