

UNITED WISDOM

Why the same advice can be unsafe when power differs

Relationships and Intimacy

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *“ever present with us”*

Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Chapter X, 1845. An excerpt describing Edward Covey's surveillance. This is a description of historical coercion, not a contemporary diagnosis.

What this article is about

Two adults receive the same advice: calmly tell your partner what no longer works for you. One can choose when to talk, go to work afterwards, and spend the night elsewhere. The other knows that refusing sometimes ends with a confiscated phone, a locked door, and a threat to withhold money. On the surface, both are being invited to speak honestly. In practice, they are being invited to take actions with different costs, paid by the recipient rather than the adviser. These two fictional examples raise a question worth asking before choosing an elegant phrase: under what conditions will it be spoken?

We examine whether advice transfers to a situation, rather than constructing a portrait of a dangerous person. How does a recommendation change when one participant controls essential resources, watches correspondence, or can punish disagreement? What distinguishes an unpleasant response from a threat to safety? Why can checking a response be an acceptable idea in an ordinary dispute and an unacceptable one under coercion? This article offers neither a personal exit plan, a medical assessment, nor a legal opinion. Its more modest purpose is to restore circumstances, consequences, and the right to decline to discussions about action. Where danger is current, accessible local emergency or specialist help takes priority over a communication exercise.

I. Advice contains conditions even when they remain unstated

Every practical recommendation rests on an imagined world in which someone will carry it out. When we suggest an honest conversation, we usually assume the person can choose a moment, end the discussion, retain access to communication, and withstand disagreement. These are not minor details added as precautions. Without them, the action itself changes. Words about freedom of choice may sound identical in two rooms, yet in one the doors are open, while in the other the person cannot decide when to leave.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Consider a fictional scene. Alena and Igor disagree about who will collect their child after an activity. Both have a phone, their own money for transport, and the option to postpone the discussion. Advice to state the specific difficulty might help identify the issue: they need an arrangement for Thursday rather than proof of who cares more about the family. This promises no success. Igor may be irritated, Alena may struggle to find words, and the solution may require reorganising their time. But declining the suggested phrase remains an available choice.

Now change one condition. Igor has previously taken Alena's phone when she disagreed and threatened to withhold transport money. The same recommendation no longer concerns only a discussion about Thursday. It includes a risk the adviser may not know about. Adding “speak calmly” cannot make that risk acceptable. Someone can express themselves perfectly and still encounter another person's decision to restrict them. Responsibility for the restriction does not transfer to the recipient along with an instruction to manage their tone.

A useful recommendation therefore has at least an implicit condition of use. In a calm situation where refusal and ending a discussion are available, clarity of expression can be considered. Threats, surveillance, or punishment call for a different route. Not every disagreement is abuse, and not every dependence amounts to coercion. Yet the absence of fighting does not make every conversation safe. The NHS discusses domestic abuse in terms of power and control, including threats, isolation, and restrictions on money. This supports taking circumstances seriously rather than diagnosing anyone from our fictional scene.

II. What matters is who pays for refusal

One useful way to compare people's positions is to examine the consequences of a particular disagreement. For one person, a refusal brings disappointment and a change of plans. For another, it may cost access to communication, housing, or contact with relatives. Identical grammar does not equalise those consequences. An adviser who says everyone must sometimes tolerate unpleasant reactions has not yet established either the scale or nature of what is happening. Awkwardness, hurt feelings, a long pause, and a threat of physical harm are not interchangeable forms of inconvenience.

The cost of refusing is not exclusively financial. Imagine an adult living in another city, caring for a relative, and relying on a shared car. Declining a family trip could require a difficult reorganisation. That is real dependence which can be acknowledged without accusing a partner of abuse. Now imagine a partner deliberately blocking access to the car to prevent a medical appointment after a disagreement. An additional restrictive action appears. The material circumstance and the use of that circumstance as punishment should be described separately.

Advisers may be tempted to judge an action by their own costs: I would simply leave, stop replying, or tell everyone. That mental transfer overlooks what supports their apparent decisiveness: a room of their own, money to live on, supportive people, and the absence of surveillance. Resources do not make anyone morally superior. They make certain actions more accessible. Recognising this means changing the recommendation rather than calling its recipient weak. Sometimes the most reasonable response to advice is that its present cost is too high.

The resulting check is this article's editorial analysis, not a diagnostic test: what can the person actually decline, and what consequences are already known? We do not suggest deliberately refusing to test a response. Earlier incidents and available information may provide sufficient reason to avoid that experiment. Advice needs a transferability check before execution. When information is limited, uncertainty remains uncertainty; it should not be filled with an optimistic assumption that everyone will reach an agreement if the wording is correct. The recipient retains the right to reject the recommendation without a detailed defence.

III. A calm discussion and assessing danger are different tasks

In an ordinary conflict, people may try to clarify what happened and which response is needed. That remains a proposal when they can decline and end the discussion. Under threats, the question changes: which actions increase vulnerability now, and where is suitable help available? A person should not first have to deliver a convincing dialogue and only then, after it fails, receive permission to take the situation seriously. Conversation need not become an examination they must pass to deserve protection or support.

Consider another fictional example. Daniel wants to tell his partner he will not argue in front of their child. If the partner can accept a pause and does not prevent him from leaving, they can discuss when to continue. If threats are already being made, someone is blocking a door, or Daniel is being followed through the apartment, advice to repeat a boundary firmly is not a neutral technique. The author does not know what will be safe in that apartment. Replacing missing knowledge with a confident phrase from a universal list would be dishonest.

Immediate danger calls for an accessible local emergency route. Where there is no immediate threat but coercion is present, specialist support may be appropriate, taking country, language, and a safe means of contact into account. The American National Domestic Violence Hotline discusses safety planning while living with an abusive partner. This is work sensitive to circumstances, not a promise that a particular collection of steps fits everyone. An American service's contacts are not global emergency numbers; the conditions of local organisations need checking directly.

Declining a conversation now does not mean abandoning one's dignity. It may prevent additional risk at a moment when alternatives are limited. This is no recommendation to endure indefinitely, forgive, or preserve a relationship at any cost. A temporary decision, available resources, and later choices are distinct. Neither a helper nor an article assigns an adult a departure date. Nor must anyone arrange reconciliation or a joint experiment with someone posing a current threat. The right to decline such an experiment does not depend on proving one's maturity.

IV. The visibility of an action changes its consequences

Advice may be unsafe before a partner hears its content. A suggestion to make a list, message a friend, or open a support website leaves a trace. In an ordinary situation, this may help organise thoughts. Under surveillance, the same trace may become available to someone restricting choice. Assessing psychological appropriateness alone is therefore insufficient. We also need to consider who will see the action and who could exploit its visibility. We cannot assume which devices or accounts another person can access.

In a fictional scene, an acquaintance advises Irina to list three reasons she wants to live separately in a notes app. Irina explains that the notes synchronise with a shared device. That information should stop an automatic recommendation to keep a journal. Arguing that the exercise itself is useful misses the issue. The question concerns storage conditions rather than possible benefits. The recipient need not disclose technical details to decline. A helper can acknowledge their inability to assess a specific risk without turning that uncertainty into a task Irina must solve alone.

The Hotline's internet safety page warns that devices may be monitored and private browsing does not guarantee that history disappears. The article preserves that limited point: digital invisibility is not assumed. It offers no verified method of hiding contact and does not prescribe deleting traces as a universal answer. Changes to settings, passwords, or habits may themselves become noticeable; a particular situation is better discussed with accessible competent support if contact can be arranged safely.

This does not mean abandoning every note or all help. It means giving up an adviser's unwarranted confidence. A channel safe for one person cannot be declared safe for another simply because the application is the same. Even the familiar word “confidential” benefits from clarification about actual access conditions, without requiring the recipient to conduct a technical investigation. Sometimes a person prefers to create no additional file. That is a valid option. Our small written reflection tool is not so important that it justifies increasing someone else's vulnerability.

V. Dependence does not erase the ability to choose

Discussing unequal power can lead to another extreme: speaking of a vulnerable person as though they cannot understand anything that is happening. A helper then starts choosing for them, controlling contacts, and demanding reports. The content of the help may be benevolent, yet its form reproduces the problem of restricted choice. An adult may be considering risks an observer cannot see. Refusing proposed help does not prove they enjoy danger, understand nothing, or deliberately obstruct their own wellbeing.

Imagine an acquaintance offers someone a place to stay overnight. The invitation is useful as an available option. Its meaning changes when it becomes a condition: come today or stop complaining. The recipient may lack transport, worry about consequences for a child, or distrust the helper's home. A reason can be requested, but answering is not the price of a right to refuse. Support respects what remains unknown instead of turning incomplete information into a moral verdict.

A helper must tolerate the uncomfortable distinction between what they consider right and what the person currently accepts. This does not require endorsing every decision as unquestionably safe. They can honestly describe limits to their participation and concern about specific threats. Disagreeing with a choice, however, does not confer a right to intervene unexpectedly, disclose sensitive information to others, or arrange a meeting with the partner. These actions have their own consequences. They cannot be justified merely because the helper thinks the outcome obvious and the recipient's refusal too slow.

Proportion matters here. A small option that can be accepted in part may be more useful than a large plan demanding immediate changes to an entire life. That is editorial reasoning about the form of a proposal, not an established success probability. Choosing a time to talk, declining details, and explaining which contact is currently available make an offer more concrete. Immediate danger nevertheless retains its separate priority of emergency help. Respecting an adult's decisions does not mean doing nothing when a situation calls for urgent assistance under local rules.

VI. Historical testimony is not a universal instruction

Chapter X of Douglass's autobiography describes surveillance, cruel treatment, an unsuccessful attempt to obtain protection from a slaveholder, and subsequent resistance to Covey. It is a person's testimony about his own historical experience. It helps show how power relations change the meaning of an available action. Slavery in nineteenth-century Maryland is not an identical model for all modern relationships, however. Douglass's reported action does not become a recommendation to physically resist a partner. Transferring that episode without knowing the circumstances would be dangerous.

The religious Psalm 82 in the King James Version addresses a requirement of justice to those who judge and speaks of protecting the poor and needy. Within our comparison, this ethical voice directs attention towards the responsibility of those with power. It supplies neither a modern protection procedure, confirmation that a particular service is available, nor a promised outcome. The text has its own theological framework; reducing it to a secular exercise would remove part of its meaning.

Contemporary professional guidance, historical testimony, and a religious demand perform different tasks. The first discusses help within a particular practice and country. The second lets us read lived experience alongside its circumstances. The third poses a moral question. They can be compared around responsibility and vulnerability, but shared words do not prove agreement among all cultures or the effectiveness of a single technique. The editorial connection remains an argument for readers to consider, not an established fact certified by the number of sources.

The practical consequence of that difference is straightforward. An inspiring story may affirm a person's dignity without determining their next step. Religious faith may matter personally without replacing information about accessible help nearby. A professional webpage can orient us without knowing our particular room. Preserving those roles allows reading to broaden the picture rather than presenting historical heroism as a compulsory standard of conduct. Nobody has to repeat another person's extraordinary act to deserve recognition of harm or respect for their own caution.

VII. Advisers also stand within power relations

Recommendations do not come from nowhere. They may come from a friend, an older relative, a manager, a professional, or someone on whom further support depends. A recipient may therefore agree less with the advice than with the need to retain the adviser's goodwill. Outwardly, they say they will try. Inwardly, they worry that refusing now would end the help. Freedom of choice matters beyond the relationship between partners; it also matters within the conversation about help. Good intentions do not automatically make that conversation equal or voluntary.

In an imagined workplace exchange, a manager tells an employee to contact her family and resolve a personal problem by Monday. The advice exceeds what is known: the manager does not know conditions at home or guarantee consequences. The employee may hear a threat to her employment even if none was intended. Separating the work issue from the discussion of personal life is useful here. Which schedule changes are genuinely possible? What information does the role require? What can the employee decline to disclose? These are specific questions about authority, not an invitation for a manager to become a therapist.

Checking one's own influence requires some modesty. An adviser can say a proposal is voluntary, but words alone are insufficient if refusing brings resentment or withdrawal of support. The observable response matters more. Will an available form of help survive disagreement? Can one part be changed? Is a report on compliance required? These questions do not give the recipient absolute power over the helper, who also has resources and limits. They simply make constraints visible rather than hiding them behind a promise of unconditional care.

A more honest language follows: I can offer this option, but I do not know whether it fits your circumstances; you need not answer now; my possibilities extend this far. These are editorial examples rather than a researched formula that prevents harm. Their value lies in accurate description, not magical wording. Someone already under pressure does not need another examination in gratitude. An adviser can leave room for refusal and recognise that support is not measured by how quickly their plan is adopted.

VIII. Sometimes the right result is to withdraw the advice

We are accustomed to calling a conversation useful when it produces an action. Yet a transferability check may conclude that the original proposal does not fit these conditions. That is not an empty result. We have stopped demanding an unassessed step and described uncertainty more clearly. An article cannot establish what will be safe instead. It can refuse to present an unsuitable action as a compulsory route to maturity, honesty, or relationship repair. Withdrawing it preserves the possibility of another decision when information and resources become available.

Return to Alena from our opening example. In an ordinary dispute about Thursday, discussion might end with a timetable or acknowledged disagreement. Where a phone has been confiscated, a helpful response is different: I will not suggest testing your partner through refusal; I do not know your circumstances sufficiently; we could discuss accessible specialist help if that is safe. There is no promise the next contact will solve everything. The difference is that the recipient no longer has to bear responsibility for universal advice written for a different range of options.

Caution also has a limit. Turning every disagreement into danger can deprive people of ordinary conversations. An unpleasant reaction does not by itself prove coercion. Specific actions, available information, and assumptions need distinguishing. Doubt works in both directions, however: an incomplete picture does not justify confidence in safety. A proportionate approach requires neither an instant label nor disregard of threats. It allows that checking conditions with competent support may be wiser now than conducting a personal experiment on a relationship.

The same advice can be assessed through three questions: what conditions does it assume, which consequences are known, and who bears them? This is an editorial framework for reading recommendations, not a clinical instrument. It neither evaluates a partner's personality nor predicts the future. Its outcome could be continued discussion, a changed proposal, seeking help, or declining to act. There is no predetermined ranking of these outcomes. The point is to keep a person from becoming expendable material for testing someone else's idea of how to live, speak, and demonstrate independence.

IX. Obligations do not make every way of fulfilling them safe

Some situations include real shared tasks: caring for a child, paying for housing, or handing over necessary belongings. Their existence does not establish that any direct contact is acceptable. A person may acknowledge an obligation while declining a proposed meeting arrangement. Advice to explain one's position face to face confuses two questions: what needs doing and how it can be organised under known conditions. Answering the first does not automatically settle the second. Recognising a shared task is not consent to threats or unrestricted access to a person.

In a fictional example, former partners need to hand over school belongings. A well-meaning acquaintance suggests meeting alone and finally talking without intermediaries. If there have been no threats and both want this, the proposal can be discussed. If someone fears stalking, the familiar idea of a final honest conversation does not become obligatory because belongings are involved. The article does not choose a safe location or handover procedure; that requires specific information and competent local help. Nor does it establish legal obligations or cancel them with a single sentence about boundaries.

This distinction protects against a false choice between total submission and abandoning every responsibility. A person can take the shared matter seriously, seek acceptable ways to resolve it, and decline the proposed meeting. There is no guarantee such an arrangement will become available quickly. But looking for alternatives should not be called evasion merely because direct contact is more convenient for the adviser. They will not experience every consequence and cannot consider their simple scheme more realistic than the constraints the recipient knows about.

The difficulty must remain visible too. Until an appropriate route has been found, the situation is unresolved rather than automatically safe. Clarifying rules, obtaining specialist support, or postponing a nonessential step may be necessary. That is separate work. It is not measured by how confidently someone delivers a prepared statement. Good advice considers both the aim and its conditions of execution; respect for one is not purchased by abandoning the other. The question of power thus returns to a specific action instead of ending in a general exhortation to be braver.

What this means in practice

If danger or coercion is current, there is no need to perform an exercise with the partner, provoke a refusal to test their reaction, or make notes that may increase risk. Where a threat is immediate, accessible local emergency help matters more. Otherwise, suitable local specialist support can be sought through an appropriate contact method. This article has not checked a particular local provider and offers no individual safety plan. If its reflection exercise is inconvenient or unsafe, it can be skipped without being replaced by another compulsory assignment.

For a calm situation, you might mentally take one piece of advice and recover its assumed conditions. Who proposes the action? Which possibilities does it presume: ending a conversation, retaining communication access, choosing a time, having an alternative? What is already known about the consequences of disagreement? Separate what has been observed from what has been assumed. You need not perform the action deliberately to obtain missing information, or search for hidden danger in every response. A useful question is whether the advice fits the known situation rather than an ideal image drawn from someone else's experience.

You could then choose a response to the adviser: acknowledge the offer while saying it does not fit now, ask to change one part, explain that discussing the conditions is currently impossible, or decline altogether. These are fictional options, not guarantees of a safe outcome. Nobody must explain personal circumstances to someone they are not ready to tell. If you are helping another adult, check whether agreement with your proposal has become the price of continued support. Describe your own possibilities honestly and avoid promising what you cannot provide.

After reflecting, notice what has become clearer: perhaps an overlooked condition emerged, important uncertainty remains, different help is needed, or the original advice seems appropriate. That is an intermediate result of understanding. An action and its consequences are separate events which may not yet have occurred. Finding accurate words does not mean the problem has been solved. The person retains the option to stop, avoid an experiment, and reconsider later. That possibility turns a recommendation into an available choice rather than another instruction imposed from outside.

Key quotation

> *“I resolved to fight”*

Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Chapter X, the confrontation with Covey. An excerpt. The author's historical decision is not an instruction to enter a physical confrontation.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Shared question	Material difference
Douglass and contemporary NHS guidance	How power limits an available response	Autobiographical testimony about slavery is not a contemporary diagnostic criterion
Psalm 82 and professional help	Who bears responsibility for protecting vulnerable people	A religious demand for justice is neither a service procedure nor a guarantee of protection
Historical surveillance in Douglass and Hotline digital safety	Who can see a person's action	Different periods and control mechanisms; the historical text is no phone instruction
Safety planning and an everyday arrangement	Under which conditions a next step is appropriate	Joint experiments and arguments are not proposed under current danger
Editorial analysis of support and religious ethics	How help preserves dignity	Our right-to-decline boundary is a contemporary editorial principle, not the psalm's verbatim teaching

Similarity here means that several questions can be considered alongside one another. It proves neither the independent emergence of a technique across all cultures nor the disappearance of differences between testimony, theology, professional guidance, and editorial reasoning.

Sources

• Frederick Douglass — Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 1845, Chapter X. Selected paragraphs on surveillance, seeking protection, and resistance were read; historical testimony, not the whole book or a safety manual.

• NHS — Getting help for domestic violence and abuse. The page's signs, support, and help-seeking sections were read; a British context, without transferring numbers or legal definitions to other countries.

• National Domestic Violence Hotline — Safety Planning While Living with an Abusive Partner. Main section and safety warning read; an American context requiring individual circumstances.

• National Domestic Violence Hotline — Internet Safety. Surveillance warnings and device and correspondence sections read; no particular technical configuration assessed.

• Psalm 82 — King James Version. The psalm was read; a religious source on justice and protection, without establishing a new theological consensus.

Tags

power, advice, safety, coercion, refusal, consequences, dependence, resources, control, surveillance, digital safety, support, dignity, freedom of choice, uncertainty, conversation, boundaries, responsibility, domestic abuse, specialist help, emergency help, historical testimony, Frederick Douglass, Psalm 82, action conditions, cost of refusal, right to stop, transferability of advice

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.