

Context

The insight component of [Insight Exchange](#) shares a person's lived experience of violence, highlighting a person's responses and resistance to violence and where 'social responses' were helpful, unhelpful or harmful. This reveals the roles that individuals, organisations and communities play in people's experience of violence.

The following text is from a person with lived experience of domestic and family violence. It shares some of their insights and reflections. The Insight Exchange team have inserted content from the [Follow My Lead](#) resource as headings to help orientate the reader and to build understanding of the lived experience of violence.

“What does safety mean for me?”

Are you prepared to respond safely if I share with you?

I am experiencing domestic and family violence; I am living an existence that is unimaginable to someone who has not experienced it. Everything I once believed that was part of my society and my community and was there to provide support, safety and help has become a perceived and sometimes real, risk and threat to me. The relationship I remember once having, which gave me enough love, support and happiness, has become a psychological and physical prison.

Please recognise that I am already active in resisting the violence, building safety for myself and others, and managing risk.

From the minute I open my eyes in the morning I spend my time and energy vigilantly assessing my surroundings, environment, and the demeanour of my partner. This has become my natural state of being. The loss and fear I experience realising that the privacy, security and physical safety my home once used to be is now a mere memory. This influences every choice I make during the day. It is debilitating.

Acting spontaneously and freely or just being the person I am has ended. I have begun to monitor my thoughts, actions and the way I communicate in a way that is so unnatural in the home environment. Psychologically, it breaks me down and emotionally I have become stuck.

Safety means making the best possible choice at the time, to minimise the ever-present threat of violence and abuse while understanding that I can't ever prevent it. Reducing the risks entails trying to predict the unpredictable mind of the person abusing me. Someone who purposefully looks for any reason to justify his damaging violent attacks.

I might be in relationships with more than one person who is committing violence against me.

His extended family are also violent, including his parents and other family members. They triangulate, manipulate and lie in order to exploit my sense of trust in the family. Different family members take on different roles to keep me confused and in a state of not knowing who to trust. The whole Family threatens my safety by keeping tabs on me. The grandparents visit every day, popping in unannounced, interfering with my parenting, critical of what I cook the children, how clean my house is, who my friends are.

The deliberate dis-respecting of my personal boundaries and my rights creates an unstable, chaotic environment where gradually my trust in people is diminished. Every autonomous decision I make is questioned making me feel the need to justify something as simple as popping out to pick up the groceries. I can't leave without telling someone first where I am going.

I resist and respond to the violence, discrimination and oppression I experience. I do this in visible and invisible ways.

Safety means doing things I would never normally do, or hate to do, just to protect me and my children. It's living in constant fear of verbal or physical or emotional attacks. It's trying to ensure there is nothing that could be used against me, or used to criticize me. I monitor the tone of my voice, how I greet him when he calls, what I do when he gets home from work and he walks through the door. While at the same time, I am looking out for signs, *"is there something in his mannerisms or behaviours that could signal that he is going to abuse me?"*

On one occasion my husband came home late from work, and found that I had put the baby to bed (at their usual bedtime of 7pm), he used this as a reason for an explosive attack on me.

His Accusations were illogical and out of context, *"you never let me see my kids, you know I work all day, while you're at home doing nothing, and then you purposefully put him to bed so I can't see him"*. He then proceeded to threaten to take the children from me so I could *"see how it feels"*.

The person abusing me knows that I do not like the violence and anticipates that I will resist.

Anything I do or choice I make can be taken as a personal attack that I perpetrated on him, rather than having a logical explanation. Overtime, I start to believe that I am the reason and cause for the attacks. His use of illogical irrational aggression renders me defenceless and unable to stand up for myself. I cannot use reason to defend myself when he is purposely being unreasonable.

If I had kept the baby up to see him, that would have caused a problem too. He would have said I was a disorganised, lazy mum who does nothing all day. He would have asked me *"how hard would it be to think about someone other than myself for once?"* or *"can't you just make sure things are done on time so that at the very least the baby is settled?"* I am the reason the baby cries at any given time. I am the reason the baby wakes up at night. I am left open to more and continuing criticism from him.

My family relationships, friends and connections with community may be under threat.

My family and friends, who were once there to provide me with support, an escape or an outlet, are also now unsafe. They are the biggest risk to his violent abusive behaviour. Spending time with them became a threat to his control over me; it could potentially expose his abusive behaviour as a reason for concern, or as a reason to want to spend more time with me.

To stop me seeing friends and family, he would accuse me of cheating; of lying about who I was with; where I was. He would tell me I was being influenced negatively by other people, saying that it's changing my behaviour. He did it so often that I lost the will to go out knowing the consequences. It was no longer worth the trouble. When I did decide to spend time with people, I couldn't even enjoy myself because at the back of my mind I knew the tirade of abuse waiting for me when I got home.

My parents became a threat to his control. If the people closest to me didn't become his enemy, he would talk with them about me behind my back in a worried and concerned manner. He slowly began making them believe that I was sick, unwell, a liar a cheat, psychologically unbalanced, further isolating me and taking away my credibility, all the while appearing to be loving, supportive and a kind caregiver.

His systematic behaviour left me to not only doubt myself, but doubt that anyone would ever listen to and believe me, reinforcing the belief that I was the problem, the cause, and that the world which was once safe, happy and supportive is now shattered.

The risks I face change over time and can change rapidly. These facts may be seen or unseen by others; however they are personal and make sense to me.

Safety means being switched on all the time checking my car every time I drive it for tracking devices or something he could have planted to make me look guilty. Noticing when my keys have been moved, or checking that my personal items and children's birth certificates have not been moved. Worrying that my car is safe to drive or if he could have damaged the mechanics to cause me to have an accident.

Wondering if the food in my home is safe to eat, or if it's the reason my children are having constant gastro. Staying safe means hiding the formula and Panadol once it has been opened in case he adds something harmful to it.

It means Checking the home, the garage and out of the way areas for poison, flammable liquid stored in dangerous places, weather to cause me actual harm or to make me live in fear he might use them to hurt me in that way.

When I noticed electrical faults and hazards that would keep appearing in the home, I would tell him, and he would say something along the lines of, *"did you just notice that? That's why I've never used that power point since the time we moved into this house."*

I try to hide money so I can pay a tradie to check things out when he is at work, wanting to get the water tested at home because he keeps telling me he wouldn't drink it, but then not allowing me to get it tested. And realising he actually never drinks the water.

I am experienced in anticipating the patterns and tactics that the person abusing me uses against me and the people I care about.

Safety means reducing my phone and internet use because I know he is tracking my activity. If I get a secret phone or create an email at the library I way up the chances of is it worth it, and what will he do if he finds out. It means worrying about how the security system in my house works, wondering why there is no manual when we moved in.

The person abusing me tries to suppress my resistance by limiting my access to material and economic basics, such as food, housing, clothing, money and my financial assets.

Because of my financial situation I was dependent on him for money. I never actually knew-the truth of his financial situation. All our Money and assets are tied up in family trusts and super so leaving him doesn't necessarily mean everything will be divided evenly. It means sacrificing my children's wants and needs as well as my own because he openly wastes, over indulges and doesn't think we are a worth the money he earns from working. When he over spends, I was told to cut down my spending further and was blamed for reckless spending.

He has signed the lease, and I haven't. So I can't contact the real estate to enquire about anything, or request certain repairs. He is the policy holder for our private health insurance and I am the member. This has caused all sorts of issues for my privacy. It has led to the exploitation and control over aspects of my health treatments.

My body and mind suffer from the violence and coercion. I can become physically unwell, fearful, desperate, lonely, sad, and angry.

When I did have visible signs of abuse, going to the doctor became a risk. The mention of needing to see a doctor could result in an attack over my mental health, he would claim I was imagining symptoms, he would tell me that whatever it is does not warrant a doctor's visit. He would say that I needed to look after the children and unless I could take them to the doctor I couldn't go. When I ended up being rushed to hospital in an ambulance, he appeared loving, concerned and worried. Upon arrival home he was angry over the money my health needs cost him, despite the fact he had caused the injury. The whole time I was away, I was worrying about what was happening to my children.

Although my despair is one form of resistance to the violence, I may be seen as 'clinically depressed' or as having another disorder. My feelings are ethical emotional responses to violence.

Explaining what is happening to me progressively became incredibly hard because by the time it had escalated, the way I had remember events and situations could appear to be an illogical series of sporadic events. The high levels of abuse and threats that I had been living through, meant that when I eventually opened up I would blurt information out in shocking and emotive ways. This made people who knew me wonder about the state of my mental health or question why I had never mentioned things before.

Safety for me means hiding all forms of physical or mental weakness, because I knew that if he knew my soft spot, then 100% that would be where he would hit me next. I had become skilfully adept at identifying the type of behaviour that he would respond to in a violent and abusive way.

My 'Unexplainable' medical conditions ('unexplainable' because I could not disclose the full details of the physical attack to the GP) caused by the harm from his continuous and repeated violent physical abuse were used against me as a threat to prove my mental instability and which would lead to my children being taken from me.

I'll be looking to see; whether you give more weight to what the person abusing me says than what I say; whether the person abusing me will be able to influence your thinking and make you think differently about me

Knowing that my neighbours, friends and family have heard the lies he has spread, I never knew without doubt if someone would believe my story.

People would judge me as being an unstable, unpredictable and paranoid person. The reality is that I am not mentally ill. I am living in fear and am constantly navigating, anticipating and responding to his violence and abuse of me and his manipulation and coercion of others. I do this to keep me and my family safe.

I have rights and responsibilities. I respond to events and exercise choice. But violence and coercive control limit my options

He has taken away my ability to control my Sexual and reproductive health. He has taken away my rights to determine when, how and if I have children. He has raped me, taken away my ability to control my own contraception resulting in pregnancies and STIs. My coerced pregnancies have kept me from gaining employment, career progression and financial security.

Safety for me can mean making the decision to stay up all night, fearing that falling asleep will only leave me open, vulnerable and at his mercy. Scared to fall asleep in case one of my children somehow gets hurt. It's the ever present feeling of not being able to predict what could possibly go wrong if my back is turned for a few moments.

The sense of panic and dread I experience after waking up realising my body gave in to sleep and trying to check that no harm had been done while I was sleeping, is a traumatic experience. Even after leaving it takes time to begin to feel safe to sleep.

I would like you to understand that I know my world best; what it has been, what it is now and what it might become.

Comparing my meaning of safety with that of people who are non-victims of family and domestic violence illustrates the harm his behaviour has on daily life for me. No wonder it is causing a social crisis. This type of prolonged and ongoing behaviour is nothing less than torture.

I was/am in constant survival mode. There was/is no safe haven in my world. Even though there is help out there, leaving what I knew, all I had and trusting someone I didn't know was/is a difficult step.

I had a sense of security from acting and behaving in certain ways that enhanced my ability to stay safe. It's hard to let go of that sense of security because it was one of the few mechanisms I had to remain in control of certain aspects and choices in my life. It allowed me to experience a sense of control.

This is my world, its complex.

I know you want to help but if you oversimplify my world so that you can feel you understand, you lose sight of my challenges and my capacities.

Acknowledgement and thanks

Domestic Violence Service Management would like to thank the person with lived experience of Domestic and Family Violence who has generously shared their insights for the benefit of others.

We acknowledge that despite our best efforts to assemble with a person a more accurate representation of some of their experiences of violence, we can never fully understand all that their experiences mean to them now or through their life. We understand that no one's life experience can ever be fully represented in language or any other form.

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