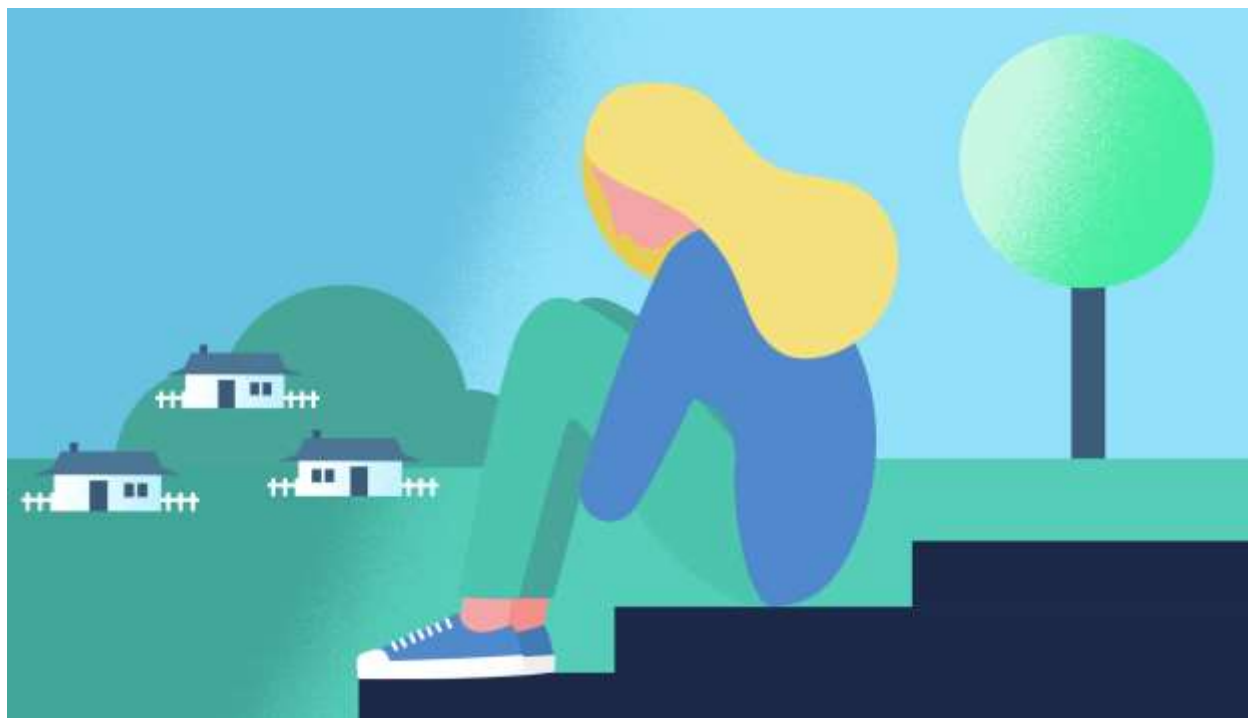


Jan: Being safe is no simple or single decision or task

The violence I experienced was an affront to my dignity and wellbeing

I was exposed to inappropriate behaviour at a young age; I have had to walk out of three different relationships that were abusive. With that comes a lot of shame and embarrassment. You ask yourself *“how can this happen to me? I thought I was a smart woman.”*

If you don't have your self-worth and your self-love, it's pretty hard to climb out of a hole, especially when you have got shit thrown at you every day.



The unwritten rules of a small country town:

I was a free spirited adventurous girl. But I was exposed to some inappropriate behaviour and so I changed. I grew up in a rural town. I've got brothers. I was the only girl. It was a very male dominating life that I grew up in. I wanted to be a man, because it's a man's world in the country. Dad wouldn't allow me to do the boy stuff, but I wanted to be one of the boys, because they got to drive the vehicles and to have motor bikes. But I had to go inside into the kitchen and do the girly stuff, and that pissed me right off, I hated it. So I used to think I wasn't as good as the boys.

In our family you didn't openly talk about relationships or sex or any of that sort of stuff, it was all taboo. I grew up in a community and at a time when there were unwritten rules:

- You don't have sex unless you were married.
- You only have sex to have babies.
- Anyone who has sex outside of marriage is a slut.

That's how it was. I wonder how much has changed. There was never a conversation about love; about making love; it was just sex.

Some things happened that were inappropriate that made me feel uncomfortable and were confusing for me at that vulnerable stage...



I am always aware of the actual and possible responses of others

"If I say something what are people going to say? I am supposed to be Christian". I lived in a small rural town where everyone knew everyone's business, everyone would have found out.

I never shared about any of the things that happened; I didn't share my story for a long time. Who would I have told? Who would have believed me? I was from a small rural town, where do you go? Who do you talk to? *No one forgets in a small town. Everyone has their expectation of who you are and what you should be. People's perception of you feed into the mentality of "you provoked it" or "can't you just get over it".*

There was no one I felt safe to talk to. Everyone knows everyone. If I was in the city or in a bigger place would I have spoken up? That I will never know.

These responses inform how or if I reach out

I was not telling anybody because of the judgement. What my parents would have thought. Would they believe me? I just went to my aunts and cried. I withdrew a lot, I rebelled a lot, and I just went dark. It was like a light had been turned off.

I pretended to be a normal happy kid; teenager; woman. But underneath I was screaming in pain, I didn't know how to ask for help. I didn't have the self-esteem and confidence that I pretended to have. I would act up. I portrayed myself as rebellious and acted as if I didn't care. I would be a smart arse. I would smoke at school. I would pierce everyone's ears. I would pretend to be someone I wasn't. I wrote this poem *"please let me play I'm just like you, what you don't know is that we all are the same... I look in the mirror who do I see, I see someone different that someone is me."* That was me, pouring my heart out; I was hoping someone would notice my pain.

I have strategies of resistance that uphold my dignity and keep me safe

I had to be smart; I would hang out with the boys and kick a footy with them, it was a strategy, if I was their mate I would feel safe. And the boyfriends I did have were sort of younger or softer. They were relationships that were safe.

When I was older and some of the situations were life threatening, I would have to be strategic about the people I spoke to; when I spoke to them; when would be safe to leave; if I should leave. I was constantly navigating this stuff. That was exhausting.

When I left the relationship, someone said to me *"how embarrassing"*, even though the relationship was destroying me they were embarrassed... those unwritten country rules...

So I just packed up and went away on my own. You'd be surprised what you can do when you set your mind to it. I did a bunch of things to avoid the reality of how hurt and how dark my life was, how much I hated things. I drank to feel numb. I did a lot of exercise which helped me physically, mentally and emotionally.

I did a lot of behind-the-scenes thinking in my head. It was planning to manage the outcomes as best I could in order to stay as safe as possible. I did little things like buying the right brand of butter, even though it's not what I liked, but it meant that he wouldn't throw it at the wall, or at me. This was me taking back power and taking control to avoid the violence and verbal abuse.

I've learnt to read people's facial expressions, the colour of their skin, the colour of their eyes, how they hold their body, how they move. I've watched all of that over the years, because you can often tell when people are going to get violent.

But it's not an ideal way to live, you already have your own life to live and then you have all this extra thinking, contemplating and planning to do just to stay safe. It's exhausting.

The openness of the communication that I have with my children is completely different to what I had. We are a very, very open family. *"If something doesn't feel right, don't do it!"* That's what I instil in my girls. *"Follow your gut, follow your intuition, it's there for a reason"*. I want them to grow up being empowered and to have choice and control over all areas of their life, their relationships and intimate experiences. I want my girls to have fulfilling relationships. Not just with their partners but with their friends, their family, with everyone. I am so passionate about this because of the experiences I have had.

It took me too long to open up and share. I shouldn't have worried about the judgement, the shame, the disappointment or anything else. I should have disregarded it all, because I do matter. We all matter. Whatever you do in life you are going to be judged by people.

I am an active agent not a passive victim

The way I live is honest and real. I work to get myself in the best situation that I can be in. I will only live in a situation that is empowering, loving and safe for me and those I care for.



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