

Michele R: Being safe is no simple or single decision, or task

Trust yourself. Follow your instinct. Have the courage to take steps forward

I'd always had the power within me, but I had to overcome the power of my abuser to re-discover this. It was a moment of realisation and perspective that gave me courage to move forward and to take back control.



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

I experienced violence from my husband for many years. He has done all sorts of horrific things to me, he has raped me and he has tried to kill me. He systematically tried to pull me away from everything, my family, my friends and any part of me that was important. We were together for almost 10 years.

Early on in our relationship my heart was telling me that something was just not quite right. However I was caring, so I was like *"ok how can I help him?"* The first time he hit me was because I stood up for myself. It was a very nothing situation that became very abusive just because I disagreed. It was hurtful and disorientating.

I was active in my resistance of his violence

I became quite skilful at reading his behaviours; his general disposition; the way he was sitting; if he looked a bit scatty or a bit uptight. *I just knew "here we go, this is not good. How should I manage this? Should I be overly nice? Should I try to appease him? Or do I need to stay away from him?"* If he wanted five different dinners, that's what he would get. Movies were his escape so I would spend eight hours watching movies with him just to appease him. The police would come to the door, and I'd have to say *"look it was just a dispute but it's all ok"* while he would be behind me saying *"if you don't send them away you're going to die"*. Sending the police away was my strategy to stay alive. I was constantly trying to manage the situation to stay safe, it was exhausting!



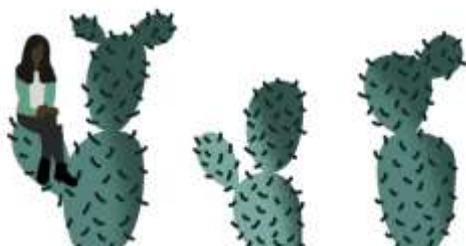
How people responded to me mattered

The other thing that was really damaging was when I would get questioned. *“Why did you stay? It couldn’t be that bad?”* I stayed because it was ‘that bad’! I knew he had the capability of killing me. He was absolutely calculated. I am not a silly little girl. I knew what was going on but I had got to a point in my life where I had been stripped of my dignity. I didn’t think that I had the capabilities to escape from this man.

I am experienced in anticipating his patterns and tactics of abuse used against me

When he knew I was pregnant he beat me to a pulp and I miscarried twice. Publicly he would be saying to friends that he wanted to have kids. When I suspected I was pregnant again I hid it from him. I produced the pregnancy test with him and my mum in the same room together. I knew that if the pregnancy was public that he would have to go along with it and this would keep my daughter safe.

Mum took a photo of us with the pregnancy test. It was public. I had managed his violence towards me, not accept it, but manage it. So for the nine months I was pregnant the physical violence stopped. I did a lot of thinking, knowing that I was about to give birth to this baby and not wanting to expose her to this horrific abuse. This time gave me space and helped me to gain perspective and clarity. Up until this point I had been fighting for my life and I hadn’t had time to piece it all together. *When my daughter was born, there was this fresh kind of something that took over me, that said “you do have the strength, you are going to do this and you are going to do this effectively.” At that point I started thinking about my exit strategy and started to share it with a few people.*



The status of my relationship changed the level of risk and threat I faced

The day he disrespected not only my dignity but that of my daughter’s was the day he had gone too far. I was breast feeding and he was kicking me because I wasn’t giving him enough attention. I knew in that moment that it was time to leave; my family arrived but he refused to let me take my daughter. In the end my mum was really brave and said *“ok you’re a good father, here you go, here’s the child, what are you going to do with her?”* She was four months old and I was due to breast feed in a couple of hours. He had this realisation and passed her back. So that was it, we left just with the clothes on our back. But I already had our passports and had arranged a separate bank account. I knew this could happen at any time. I never went back.

The response from services can make us safe or put us in danger

The first time I sought help from the ‘system’ was when I approached a service that works with families. I spent two hours talking to a case worker about what had happened to me. I knew my situation was serious and that it needed to be taken up with the police. I wanted the support to do this, and to work out what I needed to do and where I needed to go.

Instead of that, I was told straight up *“this man has a right to see his child”*. Can you imagine? I have gone through this horrific violence and I have shared my story. Just opening up about what had happened to me was a huge thing. I was desperately trying to hold onto my little girl because I knew she still wasn’t safe. And yet I was told by a system that she needed to have time with him. He was given access. He went on to abuse her in a sexualized way.

If I was to have any regret, it was that I didn’t seek a second opinion. I was asking for help and being told that *“he has rights to see his child, and you have to remain child focused”*. For me that was an alarm bell straight away. I was concerned that he was going to drive off a bridge with her just to get back at me. At what point would that have been the best outcome for the child?

It was like this: I am empowered, I have my intuition, I have knowledge and skills, yet it felt like all of that had been stripped away from me by the system. To not be given an avenue to quickly create some changes to keep her safe was ridiculous. What I needed was a counsellor, or a police officer who could be empathetic and guide me in the right direction. I may as well have gone back to him, the system was that abusive.

However the offices from the Sexual Abuse Squad were amazing. They were kind and caring. They listened to me; they were honest and upfront about what they could and couldn't do.

The whole process was horrendous. And while this is happening, in the back of my mind I am dealing with the fact that my daughter had been abused in a sexualized way by her father? And the police are saying that they can't give me the assurance that he won't be granted further access. The transparency of the police helped me to make informed choices to support my beautiful little girl.



My daughter's responses and resistance to his violence

I became my daughter's Mum, Dad and counsellor; she didn't want to see anyone else. I supported her through a process to explore her experiences. This enabled her to decide 'how' and with 'whom' she would communicate her experiences. It was really important to me that this was something that she should not feel bad about.

She was brave from the start, a quality I didn't feel that I possessed at the time. She showed me the way and together we were a force to be reckoned with.

When she made her statement to the police, there was a point where she was speaking about the abuser and being asked very specific questions. She turned to the police officer and said "*you have been referring to this man as my 'Dad', can we just call him (Name)?*" She was drawing this line in the sand. From that point on he was (Name), not her dad. She didn't like the idea of him being referred to as her father. She now refers to him as the ex-father.

I have this beautiful daughter who is also an advocate. We're a pretty cool team ... actually I think that is an understatement; we're a dynamite team together, we really are and we love each other immensely.



I am an active agent not a passive victim — I Never give up. I keep pushing forward

I had totally disconnected from my beliefs and my system of guidance, because I was thinking it had wronged us. I went into a spiritual desert. I wasn't being true to myself and I wasn't feeling supported. But regardless of how misaligned I felt, I had the strength; I just needed to tap into it.

This period of our life was horrific however it hasn't defined who we are. It has created a set of circumstances that has given us purpose. If there is one thing I have learnt, it's to trust your instincts, never give up and keep pushing forward.



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