

The insight component of [Insight Exchange](#) shares a person's **lived experience** of violence and abuse, 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 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. The following insights are from a person with lived experience of domestic and family violence.

Sally

"You're ok, he never hit you."

I worked in a corporate career and was always very career focused. I travelled a lot too. When I met Steve he was working remotely, and I was working crazy hours. I was busy, busy, busy. I was in my mid 30s and we were talking about getting married and ultimately having children. I'd seen the doctor who said "If you're going to have children you need to hurry up, because your likelihood of having a safe pregnancy diminishes the older you get." She said "it's going to take you at least a year." Friends of mine were having IVF as they were having trouble getting pregnant; others were doing IVF with a donor father. So, I followed her advice, came off the pill and fell pregnant straight away.

I'm an organised and driven person. When I found myself pregnant I wanted to plan everything out and make sure that we could do it the best way possible. I was a little nervous because I didn't know him as well as I wanted to, and we weren't at the place where I thought that I would like to be becoming a mother. But I realised that I was fortunate to be pregnant. And so, kind of thought, well, let's make the most of it.

Steve was working on contract roles in mining; he was flying in and out, and doing long periods away. It was supposed to be four weeks and then it would go to six to 10 weeks with just brief phone calls every few days.

"If you're going to have children you need to hurry up"

We had financial discussions. I talked about what I owned and what I had, and he talked about what he had. I asked him if he had any debt, he said no. And I didn't have any debt except for a mortgage.

We decided that we would live together in my house. I said to him, "obviously the mortgage is mine but why don't you pick up all the bills?". He never did pay the bills but he paid for dinner and other things. I'd get home and he would have done my washing or cooked. Things that I didn't expect him to do. I did feel strange about the finance side of it because he was working too. We had a chat about it, but he would just avoid having conversations; I guess we talked about the big picture finance side of things but not in an ongoing way.

I have my own sense of what is important right now and in the long-term. – *Follow My Lead*

The pregnancy was difficult. He wasn't there for most of it, which was hard, especially living on my own, working full-time and long hours. I also renovated my house so it was ready to be rented out. I had a lot going on and expected his support. During my pregnancy, my friends and my girlfriends

were my only support network. I never really had family support. I guess I just endured my pregnancy.

I had friends who were going through IVF and not able to get pregnant. One of my best friends really struggled, she was trying to have her child by herself and because I was pregnant, I felt awkward as I was pregnant so should feel lucky despite the challenges. So, I just stopped talking about it.

We decided that we would move to Townsville because he would be earning a high salary and could work two weeks on, one week off. That way he could look after the baby more and I could go back to work remotely. So, everything looked good to me.

I'd said to him, "when I'm on maternity leave, I'll have maternity pay and I can pay off my mortgage with that". We talked and agreed he would "pay for the living costs and then we can talk about it and see the accountant as to what is best for us." And he agreed, he said, "yes, that's fine".

At 30 weeks I thought I was going into labour, and I ended up in hospital, I was in a lot of pain. Fortunately, I was staying with friends. But Steve was still away on work. I was starting to get a bit worried as he wasn't 'there' or 'interested' or being supportive as I had imagined and seen other imminent fathers be, but I trusted him. He kept saying to me "Don't worry about it. Don't worry".

I felt stuck because I was pregnant and I didn't know what to do.

I ended up in hospital and asked him to come and support me. That was the first time I sort of saw him explode with anger. He got very angry at me and angry that he would have to come to Melbourne to be with me. I'd seen him treat his mother badly and I'd seen him be angry to call centre operators and when he got frustrated. I was surprised at the level of his rage and contempt and his response to me.

I was upset about the way that he'd not been there for the pregnancy. I suggested we were going to go to the baby classes and he completely blew up; accusing me of trying to stop him from working; that I didn't respect his time; and why would he want to go to baby classes? That was a bit of a shock and I spoke to friends who were also pregnant at the time. Their partners were taking the lead and booking the classes and happily going along and finding it interesting. I was really upset about it, but I just kept on and threw myself into my work, I tried to bring it up several times, he refused to talk about it and called me paranoid and neurotic

To be honest, I was frightened about the relationship, about where it was going. I felt stuck because I was pregnant and I didn't know what to do. I rang EAP (Employee Assistance Program) at work, which was no help. I saw somebody in person who told me I should do meditation and take deep breaths, and just didn't get the whole context. I saw a psychologist and she was alright, she was more focused on my wellness during pregnancy and educating me about post-natal depression particularly with the move to a remote place. I realised in hindsight if I'd seen someone who specialised in control, and that side of things, perhaps they would have picked up that there were big issues.

I was just surviving, working and doing what I had to do. I renovated my house and was just going into task mode. My background is engineering and IT project management so, treating it like, right, how do I get through this. Waking up in the morning, what do I need to do?

I guess I had faith that he would be okay and that the upside outweighed the downside.

I found out after that he was very critical and cynical about whatever I was doing and he'd told all his friends ... "how's she going to renovate the house it's going to be a disaster. What does she know about building?" I just said to him, "trust me, I will do this". It took two and a half months. It was a

pretty well executed renovation to do it in that time, working full time and managing tradies and it being in a nice suburb in Melbourne. But he took every opportunity to tell me how hopeless it was and the poor job I was doing. It all made him very angry and he refused to acknowledge when it worked out well.

I did not want to go somewhere as remote as Townsville; I'm just not a country-town kind of person. I had strong feelings of not wanting to go but I wasn't talking to anybody or able to express my worries. I realise if my situation had been different... but I was in survival mode, just enduring and just keeping on. But basically I had packed my house up and moved to Townsville at 32 weeks. The only reason I did it was because of Steve.

I had strong feelings of not wanting to go but I wasn't talking to anybody or able to express my worries.

Moving to Townsville I was expecting that he would have everything sorted as we'd discussed and he'd promised. I was doing this end and he was sorting that end.

However, when I got to Townsville there was no house as promised and there was no high paying job that he had said he had. He'd actually taken a contract job up in the Northern Territory instead of going to Townsville for this job he'd told me he had. I remember he called me to tell me when he arrived in the Northern Territory. I flipped out and just said, "you're joking, what are you doing up

there? You told me that you were going to be in Townsville. I am pregnant; I've shut my house up." He got angry and accused me of trying to stop him working and being selfish.

His brother had a small basic unit in Townsville that he said we could rent. It was very dirty, in poor condition and came with only a fridge, kettle and microwave. There was no stove or oven. His brother wanted unreasonable above market rent for it, Steve said he would arrange with his brother to move the rusted and broken furniture which furnished it so mine could go in when it arrived on the truck.

When my things did arrive I rang his brother as Steve was out, and I said, "When have you got your truck coming to pick up your furniture?" He said, "what are you talking about?" I was like, "Steve said he spoke to you and my container of furniture is due to arrive any day and will not fit. His brother got really angry and told me to deal with it. I organised a truck and put his stuff in storage, his family were all very angry at me.

I was in panic mode. I was conscious that the baby was not far off. I was 34 weeks pregnant. Christmas was approaching, Steve did not have a job and there was the threat of cyclones.

I did a first aid course and was advised to get a cyclone kit together and work out a plan if a cyclone should hit. Steve laughed at me said, "You don't need a cyclone kit, or a plan, don't be ridiculous." And I was like, "I'm pregnant, you may not be here if you're working and I need to have a plan. What's the plan?" He didn't want to have a plan. So, I got a cyclone kit together.

Then the car he was supposed to own didn't eventuate, he didn't actually have a car. He managed to borrow a car, but that belonged to his aunt and ultimately, she needed it back. I said "you need to buy a car; you said you had one, it's not going to work with one car, especially in Townsville and I'll have a baby." He got angry saying, "you just want some bloke with money, you want someone who drives a BMW." Then I actually stopped talking a lot. I was also in a lot of pain due to pregnancy complications and good medical support was not available which was worrying.

I discovered that the house he owned was about to be repossessed because he hadn't been paying his mortgage for six months. The letters from the bank said that if he didn't pay in two days' time, then the property would be repossessed. The bank debt people were calling him on his phone and he had given my number as an alternative number. I started getting upset about it and he was angry. Every day he was furious, just either saying nothing or he'd get really abusive.

Everything I said annoyed him. I had to think about how to ask him questions... even ordinary questions he exploded at me or verbally abused me.

With my savings I'd put aside to pay my mortgage I paid off his outstanding mortgage and enough to cover half a year's future payments and his credit card. I tried to help him get a job, because had come back to Townsville and he didn't have a job either. He turned off his phone, didn't check his email. He just got really, really angry at me. I was still working full-time remotely. And he'd just sit and watch Foxtel, clicking over the stations. I was trying to work on the phone and computer in this tiny little box that was this sort of hothouse and he would just be so angry at me. I just went into trying-to-fix-it mode. He finally got a job at 28 bucks an hour, which didn't make sense. That was not what I moved to Townsville for.

We were consistently talking about making plans. We would confirm that this or that would happen, and then the plans didn't eventuate. And I kept saying well here is how we can fix it but he'd respond with anger and aggression. I kept discovering he was deliberately misleading me or just not telling me the full story. I found that anything I said, he'd respond abusively "you bloody f*&#ing shut your cake hole, I don't want to hear anything you've got to say". And so really, everything I said annoyed him. I had to think about how to ask him questions. Things like, "do you want to come to see the midwife today?" even ordinary questions he exploded at me or verbally abused me. He never came with me to see the midwife.

I am always aware of the actual and possible responses of others from professionals to my friends and family members. - *Follow My Lead*

I went to see the GP and got a mental health plan to see the psychologist. The psychologist was hopeless; she talked about herself and then talked to me about how to talk to him advising that maybe I need to take a deep breath before I had a conversation with him. All this stuff that in hindsight was ill advice, despite me telling her about his abuse. I had seen one very good psychologist in Melbourne just before I left. Steve just wasn't participating in the pregnancy and she had a conversation with him about how things change. I wasn't ever dependent on him but then I suddenly became a lot more physically dependent. I had had medical complications from about 12 weeks which meant I could barely walk I'd be in terrible pain doing almost anything. She was clear with him, "she needs physical help".

I remember New Year's Eve, we had planned to go to our friends' place in Townsville, and I was really sick, I thought I was going to go into labour. He got very abusive at me, standing over me. That's when he started getting more physically threatening, not just shouting at me and belittling me but actually standing over me and intimidating me. I was pregnant, and I was vomiting. And he stood over me, very angry that I was ruining his New Year's Eve "F-you, I'm going to this party, you're doing this just to ruin my night". I knew there was a limited ambulance service in Townsville and on New

Year's Eve there would not be taxis. I couldn't drive myself if I had to go to hospital, and I thought I was going into labour.

I'd spoken to my Dad and he said, 'Just see how you go.' But I was too ashamed to tell him that Steve had gone to this party. I was starting to get pain and I thought 'oh my God he has to come home.' I was trying to ring him but he ignored his phone and then turned his phone off and turned up at half past eleven, drunk and raging. I just remembered thinking, 'oh my God, this is a disaster' and deep down knew that it was going to get worse.

That whole week he barely spoke to me, if I picked up my phone to call somebody, he would blast me and say, "What, are you going to call your friends to shit-can me?" It was all about shit-canning him. If anyone texted, if he was there, he would get angry. He worked all the time and worked various hours. I didn't know when he was going to be home. I'd ring him and say, "are you going to be home for dinner?" And he'd be like, "yes, I'm home in five minutes". He'd turn up three hours later. And then I would be, oh, I've eaten my dinner, and then he would get angry that I hadn't waited for him to come home for dinner. If my friend rang, he would blast me, "you want to spend time with me, you want me to be home, and then you're just on the phone to your friends". If I got a message he would be like, "who was that, who's the message from?" My boss who was a male would call and he would go bananas. And he would be like, "oh, is it John again? What's happening there? Why's he talking to you? Why's he calling you?" If I was sent a text message he'd grab my phone. I was really sick at this point in my pregnancy and was terrified I would go into labour on my own. I had to have daily scans which I did on my own.

“Look everyone gets stressed before you have a baby. It's really stressful for him and you're in a new place and he probably just wants to look after you.”

I kind of just stopped communicating. I've always been a talker and I've never, ever had issues with communication at all. And then I would actually struggle to communicate with anybody. People were sending me baby presents, and I would go into the post office in town and I would struggle to even speak to the post office staff. I stopped making eye contact too and looked to the ground and just wanted to be invisible and make as little impact as possible.

I think a little bit was baby brain, certainly, at the beginning. But it was very much because I was terrified. Terrified of not knowing what he was going to do to me next. I wasn't sleeping, that was a little bit the pregnancy, but more the nature of his interrupting my sleep, instead of nurturing and being cared for I had someone waking me up and being abusive. I found I was on guard all the time... I'd spoken to friends of mine about it, but I probably dumbed it down. So, then people were saying, "Look everyone gets stressed before you have a baby. It's really stressful for him and you're in a new place and he probably just wants to look after you". Saying all these things that weren't very helpful.

Two of my friends experienced an incident when he got more violent and they were like, "oh my God, we had no idea", they had never experienced something like that before.

When I arrived at the hospital to have my baby, there were no midwives; there was only a student midwife on. The birth was traumatic.

His new job was casual and he would work seven days a week. After the baby arrived he went back to work almost immediately. He would find out the day before his shift what time he was working. It could be 2:00 AM, 4:00 AM, anytime. I fed and cared for the baby on my own, he rarely helped. I'd

never had sleep problems but he would wake me up at two in the morning by turning the light on, shaking me and shouting at me and say, "You need to drive me to the airport, or you need to drive me to work". And I would be like, it's two in the morning, get a cab, and he would just get more abusive. So, then I would get myself and the new baby out of bed and drive him in my car to the airport with the baby crying.

Fortunately my father had planned to come up when the baby arrived; he was very organised and functional. He recognised Steve's anger and he had a conversation with him over a glass of wine and a talk about the meaning of anger and how anger burns twice, and that it doesn't help anybody. Steve just switched off. Dad went into 'problem solving mode', helping me do the things that a partner would do, changing, feeding, cooking, doing the washing, whatever it was, just trying to give me as much sleep as possible. Mum came to see the baby for one night and then went to New Zealand for three months.

I really struggled to articulate to my dad what I was finding difficult because he is very practical and I felt like he would think I was giving up. He came in assessed the situation, and said "right what needs doing?" Baby needs feeding, whatever it was and went into 'mode'. So I almost couldn't let him know where I was at emotionally.

The abuse I have experienced in the past might be similar or different to current or future threats I face.

– *Follow My Lead*

I made two friends that I saw at the mother's group. The dads would come to that group too. He came once and didn't come again as he didn't cope with the babies crying. When my baby cried, he would get really angry and would snarl at me and say, "feed it, it's hungry." And I was like, "no, the baby's been fed, clean nappy, it's whatever it is, she's just crying." I found breastfeeding easy. I found putting the baby to sleep easy. But my daughter didn't sleep a lot and Steve was still coming and waking us up, but it got worse. He'd come in, turn the lights on and blast me. I had the baby in a cot in our room, so the baby would wake up. The baby would start screaming and then I couldn't really settle her. He wouldn't help. He'd get home from work and I would be dying for someone else to hold the baby and to have a shower and some time alone. He'd take an hour shower and then explode if I asked him to help as he wanted to have dinner.

I started feeling frightened that he wouldn't control his anger. He was unsafe in other ways too. He would get home from work and go, "right, I'm going to take the baby for a walk" when the baby was about to have dinner or lunch or a sleep. He would tell me in no uncertain terms, "I'm taking the baby" and would accuse me of wanting to feed the baby or put her to sleep just to stop him having time with the baby. If I tried to get a baby bag together with water, a shade cloth etc he would shout at me for purposely delaying him from going out the door and would storm out without it. It was 39 degrees outside and he would take her to the playground and put her on the metal slippery dip, she was three months old. So, I would explain that you don't take such a young baby to the playground with no shade in the middle of the day, and that as she was only three months old, she couldn't go down the slippery dip as the metal would burn her. Then he would get abusive, but I would stand firm and say, "you're not taking the baby to the playground". But then I would try and facilitate other ways for him to spend time with his daughter, take her for a walk in the cooler part of the day or have a bath with her? Play with her on the floor mat I had set up. Because he didn't have a connection with her and I thought maybe skin on skin time would help. He kind of enjoyed that but there wasn't the connection or interest that I expected and had seen with other partners and their babies.

He probably only took the baby for a walk three times. Once, when the baby was about six to seven months, he didn't bring a water bottle, he wouldn't answer his phone and didn't come back for hours. When he finally came back the baby was floppy and had heat rash. Another time, we were staying near where someone had been attacked by a crocodile, He took the baby down in the pram to the same spot on the water's edge and took a photo of the baby in the pram there and sent it to me. I just freaked out and called him, going, "what are you doing?" And then he laughed at me. He said, "You're so paranoid, you're so controlling. How am I ever going to be a father if you're breastfeeding all the time?"

The violence I experience undermines my wellbeing across many areas of my life. – *Follow My Lead*

I talked about some of this to the women from the mums' group; they were horrified but didn't know what to do. I couldn't see things then as I can see them now, from the outside looking in. We would be invited to a barbeque, but then I'd have to cancel because he would say, "I'll be home in five minutes" and then he'd turn up four hours later with my car, so I was stuck. When they had a mother's group reunion he wouldn't turn up, I'd be ringing him, and he'd turn his phone off. He'd get home at ten o'clock at night and he'd verbally lay into me, saying I was trying to stop him from working; all he was doing was trying to put a roof over our heads and food on the table. I paid our rent, for the food and all the bills. His wage went on paying off further debts that I hadn't known about.

He never got mail, so I used to open all the mail, and there was something from the tax office which was a bill for tens of thousands of dollars in tax fines, because he hadn't done his tax returns for ten years. I really freaked out about that as I was still thinking of 'us'. Looking back I realise I wasn't talking to anyone about this. I wish my parents had intervened and said what on earth is going on, come home. But instead I was stuck there.

So I stayed up to whatever time to get his tax done, worried about the mortgage, and he'd be like, "what do you effing know about tax?" I rang the accountant and say, "okay, we're going to come in to meet with you", and the accountant ran through the work I had done highlighting to him that it was, "really important" to settle this immediately to avoid further action and fines. I often would try and use other people, 'experts', so that it wasn't always me saying it. I was looking at it from a financial perspective - you can't have this debt, you've got to pay it off. Then I found out he had huge credit card debt and he was only paying \$50 off a month. I paid off a lot of that debt as well which made him even angrier. But I just saw it as being practical. It's just going to get worse and he's never going to get on top of it. He'd always criticised my salary but in helping do his tax I discovered that he'd never earned even half of what I'd earned. There were a whole lot of things like this that I found out. I tried to talk to him about it but he'd just get really abusive. He started to stand over me and rage at me. I always had the baby with me or in the next room so she was always experiencing it, day and night. I was being very persistent and practical, I couldn't understand his behaviour. It also made me worried as all my hard-earned savings were going to pay off his debts and our living costs that he had agreed to pay.

The thing that changed me was when I was really sick. He'd been away working, I can't remember where; it was one of those remote islands. He'd just gotten back and then went straight to work. He didn't come home to see if we were alright. I went to the shops and I was feeling really sick. I didn't know what to do. So, I rang him, and I said, "You have to come in, you have to help me. I'm really sick, I've got gastro and vomiting in the shopping centre carpark and it's a complete disaster".

He started laughing. I was crying, and I just said, "I need you". My daughter was screaming and the car was baking in 40-degree heat. I said to him, "you need to come home". He was like, "I can't, I'm out at work", and then he abused me for calling him at work. I managed to get us home but was vomiting all the way. I spent the day on the floor waiting for him to get home and luckily I was still breastfeeding so I could still feed the baby. When he got home he just laughed and refused to help me or the baby. For me, that was the last straw.

I may receive both positive and negative social responses from others. The quality of the social responses I have received influences 'if' and 'how' I engage with social networks and services.

- *Follow My Lead*

I booked a flight back to Melbourne. My girlfriends picked me up and I was really, really skinny. I'd put on quite a lot of weight when I was pregnant but by then I was probably 15 kilos lighter than I'd ever been. They were just shocked. I was not talking. When I did start talking about things, they tried to help and said, "Look, it's not that bad, it's probably living in Townsville, it's not you, I'm sure he doesn't mean this."

I just stopped talking again because people didn't listen and I couldn't seem to communicate how bad it was. That type of response from people continued the whole way through.

I guess the hard thing with my friends is that he really shut me off from them. If I texted or called them he would go bananas. I was also really hands-on with the baby and being by myself 24/7 was exhausting. It's hard to call friends when your baby is not sleeping and you're breastfeeding.

I went into survival mode ... even going back to Melbourne it got worse, but I just went, right, what do I need to do? That's my comfortable zone because it's what I've been doing for the last 20 years at work. I was functional but emotionally, I was falling apart, I was really struggling. I was so thin, I looked terrible and I stopped talking to people. I found that if I tried to talk, people would just say "Oh don't worry about it; it's hard being a new Mum. I'm sure it will get better." I just tried to get out and to spend more time at my dad's.

"Look, it's not that bad, it's probably living in Townsville, it's not you, I'm sure he doesn't mean this."

When I was trying to transition my daughter to solids at about six months, she wasn't eating. I spoke to a paediatrician, and he said "you have to try warm food", etcetera. This seemed to work while it was just us staying at Dad's and she started eating, but then when we went back to Townsville, she stopped again. The health specialists thought that she may have developmental needs because she was not responding.

She had lived with this constant terror, her father waking us in the middle of the night and demanding that I drive him to the airport or coming home, switching the light on and screaming at us about something I'd supposedly done to undermine him. When I was trying to feed her he would fly into irrational abuse, standing over me and the baby in her high chair. Being angry with me for sending a text message to a friend. Screaming if I asked if he could look after the baby so I could have a shower and 20 minutes to myself or to call my father or a friend. He was always unpredictable and

refused to communicate or commit to plans. We were always on tenterhooks. He was either quiet and ignored me or raging and abusive. I never knew which one.

My daughter was missing milestones, she didn't wave, she wasn't clapping, she wasn't doing all the things that she should have been doing and she was just floppy. If laid her on her tummy for 'tummy time' she would just lay there face down and not moving. She couldn't lift her head or arms. She would respond to me and smile and was interacting with me, but was terrified to go to anyone else. She would shut down altogether on a regular basis; I would find her lying on the floor, conscious with eyes open but not responding. However, her body was tense and frightened and it would take me hours to cuddle her and bring her back to being ok and into a lucid state. She would be very hard to feed following these episodes and would wake every hour or so during the night crying out and shaking.

At the time I told the youth health nurse, I talked to her and said that Steve was very difficult, very angry. She gave me this sheet, like, photocopies of photocopies of photocopies, of how to have a conversation with a difficult person and kept reminding me to breathe.

So when my daughter was about a year old and we were back visiting Melbourne and Steve had followed us. At this point I didn't want him physically anywhere near me because we were terrified of him. He was accusing me of sleeping with other people. Like, if the pest control guy came he was like, "did you sleep with him?" I had a small baby and the pest control guy was about 70. Then he would abuse me about this, "I know what you're doing when I'm at work, I know the kind of person that you want".

I didn't want anything to do with him physically and was terrified of him. When I fell pregnant, I remember finding out and being terrified, because I knew what he was like and, I was just working on how to get out. What my options were with one baby, but being pregnant again?

I rang him and told him I was pregnant, and he said, "Well, it is what it is", and didn't say any more and hung up. I had to get out. I said to him, "right, I'm moving back to Melbourne". He said, "Well, I'm coming". His work never got any better and Townsville was quite expensive to live in; he couldn't even afford to pay his own bills. So then, I organised a move and I just was sort of there with him, but I was really focusing on myself and the baby.

So I moved back to Melbourne. I rang a lawyer and my accountant, and just told them, this is the situation. I went and saw a counsellor who in hindsight wasn't a counsellor but a marriage guidance person who charged an absolute fortune. Steve was abusive to me and snapped in front of her and she said to me after having a one on one session with him, "I would not be here by myself without a security camera with him because he's got major issues and I understand why you're frightened of him".

He started getting more and more abusive. Every day he would verbally attack me, all hours of the day and night, waking me up; he would just do everything to make my life difficult. He just undermined me the whole time and I was living in this heightened state. I'd rented a house in Melbourne, and he just moved in with us and the counsellor said to me, "you've got to get him out." She said to us, "right, you need to have a break because this is not working." She said to Steve "you need to move out and let her be pregnant". So, we managed to get him out which was great.

The actions of the person who has abused me may be similar to others but are also completely unique and specific to me and those whom I love. – *Follow My Lead*

He used to have a knife belt for work, with these massive knives and he would leave them lying around all the time. I was like, “you can’t leave that around because we’ve got a toddler”. And he’d be like, “well, why don’t you move them?” Every night he’d come and do exactly the same thing, he’d put knives on the floor, on the couch or on the bed. At the time I was being practical like if he had left a towel around, but it started getting more threatening and provocative. He would pretend to come over to cook dinner for myself and the child, and then he would verbally abuse me. And I was like, “you’ve got to leave”, I was worried that he was going to hurt me or my daughter.

When I was pregnant, I thought he was going to strangle me on numerous occasions because he started getting a lot more physical. Being pregnant again I was vulnerable. I remember several times I had to scoop up the little one and run out the door, throw her in the back of the car. Distract Steve by saying something’s out the back, and as soon as he ran out back I’d run out and then disappear and call the police. I’d called some of his friends too and they all said, “Well, he’s been angry, he’s probably just stressed about money.”

And I was like; “No, I’m frightened he’s going to kill us”.

One night I was home by myself, 30 weeks pregnant with my 14 month old daughter it was midnight and someone was smashing on the front door and windows. I thought, oh my God. I rang Steve and his phone was off and then I rang triple zero and the Police came within about eight minutes. They said, “Look, there’s probably someone drunk, you can see that they’ve stirred up all the dirt on the front lawn and they’ve run off, but don’t worry about it, lock your doors, you seem fine”.

I rang him the next morning and he blasted me saying if he was there I wouldn’t have these problems. It was my fault and that it will happen again if I was on my own. I’m now pretty sure it was him. I started bleeding the next morning. I was terrified I was going to lose the baby.

The thing that frightened me most was seeing that he had such black anger and hatred. I don’t know where it came from. He was also threatening to kill himself or to hang himself. He was sort of saying to me, well, “Without you and the kids, I’ve got nothing, so I may as well just kill myself or hang myself”. So then, I was ringing his parents saying, “He’s going to kill himself or he’s going to kill us, I need your help”. His dad just said, “Well don’t leave him.” And his mum was saying, “I can’t help you, we’ve got our own things to worry about”.

“I can’t help you, we’ve got our own things to worry about”

His sister told me how selfish I was and how much trouble I had made with their family. His brother said he’s always been like this.

During my second pregnancy, I had a good obstetrician and I did talk to him, but I didn’t say much. But I did say that I didn’t want Steve in the delivery room.

My daughter was still struggling with eating. She went from being in the 50th percentile weight wise, to the 5th percentile. She was basically starving. But Steve told the doctor that I was crazy, and I was

obsessed by breastfeeding and that I wouldn't let her eat solids. He made all this stuff up and so, the doctor thought I was crazy.

I was really thin again, and the obstetrician was like, "right, we need to get you eating properly and we need you to put weight on". I was almost in a stupor. My friends didn't know what to say. It was just awkward. If he knew someone was coming over he would suddenly miraculously be home from work. He'd be changing the baby and, you know, "Babe, do you want a cup of tea"?

That's the other thing that he would do. He would behave appallingly and then he'd bring me a bag of nuts, or flowers or something, and say, "I'm really sorry". But he only really spent a couple of days with my daughter. He would take her to the park in the height of summer, forgetting her hat, forgetting water. The thing was, I had just stopped really bothering to talk to people, because no one was listening. And I realised that people didn't understand. I didn't really know the term 'domestic violence'.

It was only when I rang my lawyer and explained my situation and my constant fear that he would kill me or the kids she said, "Do you know what domestic violence is"? And I said, "not really". And she said "you're in a really bad place".

This is when I told her about the counsellor that we were seeing and she said, okay, "I'm giving you a heads up, get away from her, she is a disaster you need to see a domestic violence counsellor." She said; "I've seen her in court, she is not a counsellor, if you look at her qualifications, she's just out there to make money."

So, fast forwarding, I had the baby, with an anaesthetist, with lots of drugs, and an epidural which numbed my fear as well as the pain as he was there, which was awful, but I was surrounded by midwives and the whole business, it was literally just a different experience than the birth of my first daughter.

In the hospital he started getting very angry about random things as soon as the room was clear. I was like, "I don't even know what you're talking about. What do you mean?" And he would just start, standing over me, blasting me verbally while I was feeding the baby. I had absolutely decided the relationship was over but I just didn't know how to extract myself and I didn't know my rights. He was threatening me, he was saying, "I know you're crazy, I'm going to call in social services and have the kids taken away from you". His mother had said this too, that if you two ever break up I'm taking the baby, so that weighed on me. Then the midwives came in. They blocked him and his family and they wouldn't let them come in. That made him even angrier.

Basically, this situation just continues until it takes another turn. I had this cloudiness and I was not my usual decision-making self, I was really struggling. My eldest daughter was only 20 months when I had her sister and she wasn't eating and she ended up in hospital because she was starving.

I moved us out of the Melbourne flat to a new rental in my Dad's name.

Please remember, there maybe much more going on than I care to say – until I know you're safe to share with. – *Follow My Lead*

On the surface I had this level of functionality but it also becomes a problem because, functionally, everything's fine, but in reality it's not. I was anxious and constantly looking over my shoulder, worried he was going to do something final and there was this ongoing terror underneath. My

daughter was also having panic attacks regularly during the night, screaming “No Daddy No”. She would wake screaming, “I can’t breathe Mummy, there’s something on my chest”. When she was three she said to me that she didn’t want to be alive anymore. She wouldn’t go anywhere near him or let her pick him up.

I had this lovely nanny she was the one person that actually said to me, “Do you realise your daughter is in a really bad place?” I knew she was bad, but I just didn’t know how bad. She said, “Do you realise she won’t go to her father, she’s terrified of him. Every time he comes home, she won’t eat when he’s there”.

Her parents live on a farm and they had a B&B, so she sent me up there with them before the move, which was lovely. They helped me with the babies.

Then when the move happened Steve turned up at our new house. He convinced the removalists that he was the owner of the house and got my key. He went to my new place and told them to just dump everything. I was expecting to come home with a new baby with everything in its place. And I got home, and he was there. The house was just an absolute mess and I was like, what happened and why are you here? Then he started getting abusive and I was just distraught.

I had a birthday party for myself and he just happened to turn up to ‘see the children’, he was quite drunk, I asked him to leave and he went into a rage. He was demanding that I go out on the street. I went out and he stormed off, threatening to kill himself, the usual thing. He was in this rage and he was ringing me, ringing me, ringing me. Like he rang me 20 times, texting me, where the F#\$K are you?

My friends were staying and they heard him shouting on the phone as he came back in the driveway towards the front door threatening “I’m coming, I’m coming in, you better let me in otherwise I’m going to smash the door in”, then he turns up and begins counting down, “five, four, three”, and then smashes it. He punched the glass in the door so hard shards of glass went into my daughter’s room.

I was too scared and they were very focused on the cost of the door not the fact I thought he was going to kill us.

He was screaming at this point, I thought he was going to kill us. I called triple zero. My friends were terrified and screamed at him, “just leave us alone, just go away, and stay away”. And then he poked his head through the hole in the door and calmly said to them, “oh, I didn’t realise you were there. What’s going on here? I just wanted my car keys” It’s just like Jekyll and Hyde. Then when the police turned up he was very ‘yes sir, no sir’. So, they arrested him, and they wanted to know if I wanted to charge him, but I was too scared and they were very focused on the cost of the door not the fact I thought he was going to kill us.

I rang my lawyer and she went “you need to get an intervention order”. Then she referred me to a domestic violence counsellor who was awesome. She knew exactly what I was talking about. Within five seconds of me talking to her she went, oh yes, he did this, and this, and this. And I said, yes, yes, yes.

This was the first time someone actually went, “I get it”. She believed me and didn’t minimise the violence I had experienced. She said, any email you receive from him, any text message, any phone call, you have to vet it through your dad or through me. Do not communicate with him at all unless you’ve checked with someone else.

I had kept trying to facilitate his relationship with the kids. I didn't know my rights and was terrified I would lose my children as he kept telling me. Despite my instincts that I should keep my children safe until he presented as civil and reasonable. He was saying he'd ring social services if he didn't have access to his kids. Also they are his kids, so I was, giving him an opportunity just to see them. I didn't have a plan about how to do things so I was meeting him at the park with the kids and he was bringing wine, and flowers, and chocolates. I couldn't stop shaking during these visits to the park and kept the children close. He rarely wanted to hold them or interact and my eldest daughter would not go near him. The counsellor said, "right let's pull you out of that. Send a babysitter or your dad." I did this and that's when it all completely blew up and his violence escalated.

I rang a central contact line, no answer. Six weeks later, they rang me back. I was ringing them, ringing them, ringing them. Six weeks. I rang a service provider. I rang all the numbers in the book. Nobody was available because it was over Christmas and New Year; there was nothing until late January.

So thank heavens for the Domestic Violence counsellor, she was very black and white. She wrote me an email to send to him saying, this is how our communication will be moving forward. I will not be speaking to you. Because of the demise of our relationship you make me feel frightened, anxious. If you want to see the children, email me and we can arrange a time. I will not be present and will be sending a chaperone. I also blocked his phone number so he had to communicate by email with me.

She wrote that for me, I sent that to him, and his violence escalated further. If anything changed he would just go, I'm going to kill myself, I'm going to hang myself. He was sleeping in his car. He'd turn up in the morning. It was 39 degrees for about five nights and he was sleeping in his car. And he'd turn up, "I want to see the children" at eight in the morning. He obviously hadn't slept, he was unshaven and frightening and then I was like, no and he was like, if you don't give me the kids I'm going to...

I was always trying to diffuse him and be practical, rational and reasonable. That's one thing I always thought, I didn't want to behave like he did. That's one thing that he always used to say to me. He would say, "We fight all the time". And I said, "We don't fight, because it's a one-way thing".

I found the police were particularly unhelpful. They came the night of my birthday when he smashed the door, there was blood everywhere and broken glass and several sober and credible witnesses. They interviewed us, and down the track, the report said as he'd told them, that he was "in the doghouse, that I got angry and chucked him out and wouldn't give him his keys and so that's why he smashed the front door". That was the report. There was nothing about the actual context, what all of us knew about his behaviour. Then they said "Do you want to charge him for the cost of the damage?"

"What's your problem?"

I was like, are you serious? No, I don't care less about the damage. It's about the big picture situation. He's just threatened me. Counted down and smashed my front door at midnight, my daughter's woken up with glass all over her and we're all terrified.

Another time I went to a local police station to report what was going on. This was one of the times when I had to leave the house because I thought he was going to hurt me or the kids, so they were in tow. I walked in, I was crying and shaking and there were other people at the counter and I said, "I just need to speak to someone" and the woman said, "What's your problem?"

And I was like, "can I talk to you somewhere". And she goes, "no". So I said, "I need to report that I'm frightened that my ex is going to kill me and my kids". She was good but then she just gave me this paperwork to get an intervention order.

And that was it. Nothing changed. Then they shut that police station. From then on he was basically outside my house every night. He would climb over the neighbour's fence and I'd wake up in the morning and there would be a broom that he'd snapped in two. Another time he'd written 'daddy' and my daughter's name on the side of a wheelbarrow he'd bought her.

I got CCTV. The police finally filed for the intervention order. So I had the intervention order, but it took them five weeks. They didn't serve him because the particular officer didn't want to disrupt him while he was at his work. Meanwhile, at night, I knew that he was outside my house. I'd hear him and the neighbours were hearing him, and they saw him coming down the driveway.

I was ringing the police and they'd turn up and go, well, "You just need to get a dog. Lock your doors". "Haven't you got some family member who can come and stay?" I was like, "no, I don't, otherwise they would be here if I did". They'd say "You're not black and blue, you seem fine, we see far worse."

The suburb I live in is a nice suburb; I suppose it's what would be called upper middle class. So, they're like, you're fine here. And at that time he was stealing my mail.

"You're not black and blue, you seem fine, we see far worse."

The police, finally got in contact with him, he claimed he was working out of the area. They said you need to call at this police station and you will be served this intervention order. He didn't turn up. The police were very empathetic to him and they said, "oh look, he's been working very hard". By this point I had CCTV and had filmed him outside my house every single night, "he's not out of town. I've got him on film over my fence opening the gate."

I changed my security gate codes. I worked out that he'd hacked into my computer and that I was not digitally secure - he knew all these things about me, what I was doing, where I was going. We went to another friend's house. I literally threw everything in the car and left. And then I got the tech guy to sweep my computer. However, he found us again using a tracking app so we had to move to another place and I got a new phone.

I went and made a statement at the police station and the officer didn't want to take it. I had anticipated this and had typed up my statement in a document. He was like "It's going to take three hours, I've got work to do and well, you seem fine."

I was like, okay, I've got my statement. I want to make a statement. I said to him, "look, I've already got it on this thumb drive" and he goes, "no, I have to do the whole thing". I had quite an in-depth statement.

By this point I was speaking out a bit more. I'd thought about the statement and I'd written it all down and I planned what I was going to say. And so, I sat down with him, it was painstaking, for two or so hours, while he typed. He was serving people at the station but I continued to be polite, and I went through it. I was there for three hours and we did it. When I read the final statement that he put together it read, it was very succinct, simplistic and along the lines of "he was angry, I felt sad..." there was no details of the fear and violence. The officer just wasn't interested, it was so inappropriate. He also refused to give me a copy of it.

The intervention order was in place by this point, but it was an interim order. So, then it was going through magistrate's court and it was going to trial. Steve was saying, "She's crazy, I don't know what she's talking about, she's made it all up." After many delays and my lawyer's intervention I finally got to magistrate's court. I was terrified because I was there by myself and the people that I

expected to be there were also very frightened of him. He was so controlling and so physically threatening I worried that he would stab me or strangle me.

My file was huge, there were loads of triple zero calls and many statements. The police prosecutor hadn't even read the file. There were so many times when the police just weren't interested because he hadn't bashed me or stabbed me. And I lived in this nice suburb, that's the big thing, they were just, it doesn't happen here, you sound fine.

When I was ringing triple zero, they do the risk assessment. "Has he killed things? Big animals? Guns? Knives?" All these big-ticket items, I was, like, tick, tick, tick. Yes. But then it would be like, oh no, she sounds fine. Then one day I did ring triple zero and I was 'hysterical' because he'd rung, and he said he was coming over. The police put me through to the family violence division and they said, "Have you got a psychologist or a counsellor, because you need to call them, we're not the people you need, we can't help you on that front, you have to sort that out." And "we suggest that you just leave home if you feel threatened."

So, we left home again.

Even with the prosecution, I would ring them to say, "obviously we've got court today, what do I need to do, is there anything?" But then they would say, look, it's none of your business we're sorting this out. I was like, okay, I just wanted to know because the outcome from court will affect what happens afterwards, or what he does tonight, or when he's on my roof. The Police kept on saying that they'd arrest him. But when they arrested him and then they would bail him.

We went through the magistrate's court. It dragged on for 18 months. It kept on getting adjourned, adjourned, adjourned. One magistrate actually felt sorry for him because he hadn't seen his kids. And then my lawyer stood up and said, "This is magistrate's court, it's not family court." But the biggest thing is, he didn't actually try and see the children, it was all about getting at me. And although the intervention order was in place, he breached it. I've got 30 odd times of him climbing over my fence, stealing my mail, all the rest of it, the supposed 'breaches'. The police only charged him with one. That was his throwing a brick at my roof in the middle of the night. It scared the hell out of me and I called triple zero and then watched it on the CCTV, watched the whole thing unwind. They said, "Oh well, lock your doors, get a dog" same thing, the standard response.

I'd been trying to make statements to the police and they weren't really interested. Eventually I ended up having to take my barrister and my lawyer to the police station and it took us four hours but I made a statement. And the police officer was just, 'oh my God' but this was only when the lawyer and the barrister came with me and said that we were here to make a statement because you will not listen to her. The officer didn't lodge that affidavit, so then my lawyers lodged it. Then the intervention order kept dropping off, and finally it got reinstated. When they finally charged him, they said, we'll arrest him, and he'll be held in, 'maybe' remand, and then he'll go to magistrate's court on Monday to be charged.

The police officer rang me and said, "Oh look, I'm actually going on annual leave". This was on a Saturday. "He can't come in today because I'm too busy and then I'm going away on holiday with my family. So I've told him to come in next week and I will arrest him then." He actually said to Steve, "I'm going on annual leave, can I arrest you next Saturday?" So, I had to leave home again for a week because Steve was outside my house again.

"Oh well, lock your doors, get a dog"

"He can't come in today because I'm too busy ... I've told him to come in next week and I will arrest him then."

The same family violence case officer is looking after my case now. And with all these breaches, he is like, "It's the same thing it's not really a breach, it's not violent". But he was sending me texts from public phones, he was writing messages ... texting other family members, sending letters to the kids, to my lawyer, notes in my mail box, doing drive by's... it's all a breach of the intervention order. But when I went to report them to the police, they said, "You're not black and blue, hold tight."

They say nothing violent has happened in the last 14 days, so we can't do anything about it. Yet they advised if I have to go magistrate's court they say "don't worry, you'll be in another room, because of the violent nature of the case."

I guess the common theme is that the police haven't helped me. And to get the support I needed from the legal system has cost me an absolute fortune. I've borrowed so much money off my father for lawyers. Is that the only way I can get something to happen; to get as far as I can to feel safe and protected? I shouldn't have to spend thousands of dollars to protect myself and my children.

Even then the Police say "it's just a piece of paper". And then "What are you doing about your mental health? Are you getting support?"

Of course I am being emotional, it's because I'm terrified.

And I'm like, seriously, I've got a job, I've got a psychologist, I've seen a domestic violence counsellor, I go to a DV group, I've got that, I'm seeing all these different people. But I can't change him. I don't know what he's capable of and that's the thing that frightens me. He's demonstrated his capabilities in some really frightening ways, but not many people have seen the knives and strangling, and all that stuff. It was four years ago that the door was smashed but there's this recent and ongoing violation of orders, he's still there.

The other thing I see is, that if you don't have a smashed face or something had happened in the 14 days prior, if there is not something physically violent, then the case gets de-escalated from the police safety meetings. They had a safety meeting and I went from high risk to medium risk, despite the previous history and then when I reported a breach it's like "It was only a letter" and I'm like "but it was to my house, it's a breach of the intervention order".

One thing I do notice is that it's interesting being a female. I'm used to working in blokey worlds. But my lawyer said, wear black and white, put your hair back, do this and do that. And as soon as you're a mother it's "oh, she's crazy." Of course I am being emotional, it's because I'm terrified.

The hardest thing is that it just keeps continuing. That's what is exhausting. Now my work is suddenly doing a lot more about Domestic Violence which is amazing. I'm working from a secure safe room. They've taken me off the directory. They've done a sweep of my online profile. But again, their assistance package is a phone, and some cash. It only caters for a certain niche.

It was hard when I was on maternity leave, I couldn't get a loan because I wasn't going back to work within 60 days. I'm a fast reader, so the DV counsellor gave me a wad of stuff and I knocked through it somehow, but for the majority of people it must be tough. You need information that says this is what you're going through. That was the hardest thing. I just didn't have the time or the energy to explain to people what I need and then I would also just get shut down.

I've got grab bags in my hallway; I have friends in the country that we can go and stay with when we have to move at zero notice. I change my patterns, change my routes to work, everything. What happens to women who are not able to plan or access resources as I have been able to?

He's not interested in our relationship, that's the big thing that he said to the psychologist; she said to me, "he wants to take you down, he's very angry. He wants to hurt you, he wants to get back at you" - he said this to her!! That's the tough thing, it doesn't go away.

I can see now and appreciate that I have been methodical in learning, becoming educated about what works and what doesn't. I know what not to waste my energy on. All these things I learned alone, from the mistakes I have made and from being shut down. So many people providing services don't have knowledge of domestic violence and don't understand your situation. But their awareness affects their treatment of you. It's exhausting, trying to explain and not being understood.

The paediatricians, other health professionals and even the dentist thought that my children had stopped eating or had other issues because 'I' was anxious or neurotic or had post-natal depression.

I would find that in many situations people would often address Steve as he would talk over the top of me and portray me as 'crazy' and then people would patronise me. Rarely did anyone actually stop and ask me about our safety.

But really every single step of the way needs to be about safety – Do you feel safe right now? Is this the safest way to do this? Can we talk? Would you like anyone to be present? You would think it makes sense for the first thing to be about your safety.

“Oh, he wouldn't do that, he's a nice guy.”

I remember telling someone about how I thought he was going to strangle me. And they said, "Oh, he wouldn't do that, he's a nice guy."

It was that same sort of response over and over again, people can't actually imagine unless they were there. I'm getting more and more friends who are starting to withdraw, because they're scared. I'm still planning my next steps. I have to plan for the response a whole suite of people who are either not listening or who are not there.

Most of my friends don't have any idea. It's only a few that I've sat with and told them end to end. Because being a single mum with two small babies, it's so time consuming just juggling everything. If people aren't going to be helpful I don't have time for them, I don't need people giving me their two cents worth. People would say to me that "Motherhood's stressful". And I was thinking, "Motherhood's a breeze, this is stressful!"

The questions I ask myself is "can they help me, are they going to cook me meals, are they going to help me with my children, are they going to protect me, or, are they going to be constructive?" If anyone is going to help it needs to be somebody who understands domestic violence. That's the one thing that I really see, most people don't understand DV. Most people don't understand the harm. Even doctors and health professionals would ask the most ridiculous things. Now, before I see anybody, I ask, "have you had experience with domestic violence?"

The threats faced were not just threats to my safety and to the kid's safety but equally threats to our liberty. His systematic brutalisation of all aspects of our lives. The vast majority of responses we have had from service providers and from family and friends were from people who did not understand Domestic Violence. Their responses often minimised the violence.

I needed and still need the support of the system but the system has continually failed to adequately respond and support me. This has left me with the burden of responsibility to maintain our safety, wellbeing and liberty in the face of his continuing escalation of violence.

My fear is that he will hurt or kill me or the kids. He's still around.

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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