

## The woman next door: Being safe is no simple or single decision or task

### My ability to work and be financially independent may be controlled and undermined

My husband was often away from the family for work and networking with his colleagues to further his career. He had this attitude that it should be my absolute pleasure to do all the domestic duties, pack lunchboxes and care for the family. I was also expected to look good, never complain and to earn a steady income.

The jobs I took had to allow me to accommodate the household responsibilities and look after the children. I found that full-time work, with no outside support plus the added costs of child care, significantly increased the stress on our family. It wasn't worth the nominal increase in income.



So, I took casual jobs and created my own income sources. This often meant working weekends and earning lower pay. It wasn't ideal, but it allowed me to be available for my children and keep up with household responsibilities.

On one occasion, I came back to the house to find my daughter crying and visibly distressed. I couldn't find my husband anywhere; he couldn't hear me calling out or her crying. He was out back getting high, the sport was blaring and he was completely unaware of her distress. I knew then that I could not confidently leave her alone with him.

### My feelings are ethical emotional responses to abuse. My slow withdrawal is a form of resistance.

He counted on my emotional, physical and intellectual support. But, anytime I showed my emotional needs, he would ignore or blatantly deny me. When I did reach out during a difficult period of loss and grief, he gave me the cold shoulder. I would lie there in silent tears feeling sad, lonely and shut out.

When I brought up how things were different at the beginning of our relationship, he said to me; *"I only did those things in the beginning so you'd marry me, the sooner you accept that this is your lot in life, the happier you're going to be."*

That statement shifted something deep within my inner self. I realised, it had all been a game, a façade, and that the person that I fell in love with perhaps didn't even really exist. I felt a quiet resistance bubble up from my core. *"This is not my lot in life; I was born for more than this."*

### I resist and respond to abuse in visible and invisible ways that are important to me.

He was a hoarder so our homes always had to have an additional space to accommodate his belongings. Those areas generally became unusable because they were filled to the brim with items that did not belong in a home with young children. In one apartment we had a small combined living/dining/lounge room to accommodate our family of four.

One day he was working on the sofa with the big screen television on and when I sat on the sofa next to him to fold laundry, he dismissively waved me away saying; *"Can't you just go to your room?"* I took the laundry and sat on my sliver of the bed realizing that I had been designated to a confined space (like a child) and that I had been living

most of my life in that little fraction of the bed. I eventually reached out to a friend and the reality of my isolated world began to open up.

I often had this feeling of being spoken at. He would literally step on my toes, interrupt, talk over, and refer to anything I had, said or did as “little”. When I’d say that it bothered me, the topic would be dismissed as being overly sensitive. He’d just continue “oh your LITTLE project” or “that LITTLE idea you had”... when I voiced concerns about finances or business dealings he’d say; “don’t you worry your pretty LITTLE head about that”! Inside I’d be screaming “I might be a small human being but not everything about me is ‘little’ and I will NOT be constantly relegated to a tiny space within my own life”.

Even though I didn’t truly realize how much he was controlling my day to day life, my internal world was still my own. I knew that it was up to me to create my own happiness. I began to understand that I AM love. That I was capable of cultivating that loving nourishment from within rather than seek it out in external relationships. I wanted to genuinely FEEL beautiful and happy inside rather than base my beliefs of what others said or how they behaved towards me. So, I made a silent promise to further cultivate a loving relationship with myself, even if it was only in my thoughts and by pursuing my own values, dreams, and interests.



### **The violence I experience is an affront to my dignity**

He made me responsible for paying the bills but insisted they be in his name. I was given access to the main accounts to do the grocery shopping, care for the children and process the bills, he controlled and monitored it. He would also get angry if I made a purchase with my own earnings on something to further my career before seeking his approval. Twice he went out and bought the ‘bigger better version’ of whatever it was for himself. Eventually, he began to manage his own money but became secretive about his credit cards. He would also closely monitor transactions in real time and comment on where I did the grocery shopping and where I’d taken the children to eat while out running errands.

One year, on our anniversary, I paid the rent that was overdue. This is something he would repeatedly promise to do but not follow through on which became a point of contention with property managers and jeopardized our ability to rent. On this particular occasion, when he realised the transaction had been processed, he came at me and yelled in my face with clenched fists. It was full-on intimidation. My daughter was standing next to me. We were in the kitchen doorway on our way out to buy picnic items to celebrate our anniversary. I shrunk down and put my daughter behind me for safety. My survival tactic was to stay calm, speak slowly and diffuse the intensity of the moment. In the car afterward my daughter questioned why I stayed with someone who yelled at us like that. I also wondered. Why I was continuing to celebrate a marriage that felt so horrible? I thought maybe it was over.

But, when we returned, he acted as if nothing had happened. Within hours he was posting photos on social media, bragging about his anniversary and beautiful family. I acknowledged then that our love was more of an illusion and I began to resent myself for playing along.

The façade felt so incongruent with what was actually happening. It did not sit well with me at all. But, I was still holding onto hope that his behaviour would change and everything would work out. I can see now that his behaviour was a choice. One that he was making over and over again.

### **My Children respond and resist the violence they experience**

As my daughter grew older she wanted to fight back. She saw his behaviour and his empty promises. She didn't understand why I would minimize and defuse the situation. She also doesn't understand why I didn't lash out at him in defence and match his intensity.

One year, around Christmas, he struck our son harshly with a magazine moments before a big event at school. Our son showed up to the event with this bloody mark on his arm; his classmates wanted to know what had happened. He laughed it off, but I know he was hurt and embarrassed by it. As our son grew and became strong and fit, his father stopped lashing out at him and turned his aggression and emotional offloading towards our daughter.

### **The person abusing me may change the nature of their behaviour rapidly and without warning.**

One day, while the children were at school, I came down to the garage to do a load of laundry. He was blocking the path to the washer. I didn't say anything but recognised he was smoking weed. So I left and said I'd come back when he was done. As I left the doorway, he came after me aggressively slamming the door as hard as possible behind him to corner me against the dining room table while yelling in my face with his fist raised up over my head. I was bent over backwards and couldn't find my balance to stand up to him. This time I was scared. Like, really scared.

As he had his fist raised above my face, ready to strike, I froze and fell silent. I couldn't really make sense of his yelling or words and I couldn't move. I instinctively knew not to say or do anything. So eventually I just looked at him. I tried to use the power of my mind to say, "You need to back off" He eventually did and then went back to the garage as if nothing had happened.

Before that day I had rationalised that his behaviour was a reaction to something I had done or said. I'd really begun to believe that it was all my fault. But, this time was different. Again, I tried to have a heartfelt conversation about how his behaviour was diminishing my trust in him. I told him I didn't feel safe and that I wanted him to seek support around what was causing him to lash out. When I told him this, his intimidation towards me escalated. It was as if the times I'd admitted to the violence affecting me only served to increase the intensity and frequency of his actions.



### **The risks I face change over time and can change rapidly**

I knew deep down inside that the relationship wasn't healthy. I thought it was best for the kids to stay in a home with both parents and that he'd see how his behaviour was affecting all of us. But, what now realise is that by staying and exposing them to the abuse, they were deeply harmed in possibly long-lasting ways. We had modelled a very unhealthy relationship dynamic that was so far from what I had set out to achieve as a kind, loving and supportive parent. I may always struggle with self-forgiveness around that and sincerely hope that I left soon enough to make a long-term difference in their perception of what true love is.

The night we fled in our pyjamas his behaviour had reached such a level of toxicity that I knew I had to end the relationship. A line in the sand was crossed when he drunkenly assaulted our daughter as our teenage son listened from behind his bedroom door. I didn't know how hard it was going to be, or how painful it was going to get, I just knew that we had to get out — no matter what the cost. Nothing means more to me than the health and wellbeing of my children.

**The decisions I make on how and if I take steps are influenced by my context, situation and the coercive control I am experiencing.** Leaving is hard and scary. The complexity of everything you have to navigate on top of processing the abuse is overwhelming.

I had no job security. In the lead up to and immediate aftermath I didn't feel confident taking on full-time work again because it was not safe to leave my daughter at home alone. I still needed to be the dependable, safe parent that was unconditionally there for my children.

It was a dangerous time. He thought I would just come back. But, every day I would take a small concrete step to close that chapter. One of the most disturbing things he did after we left was a cold-hearted stare he'd give our daughter. To her, they felt like thinly-veiled threats. It made me realise that getting away from him physically and moving into a security building was imperative. Leaving was the first step. But it was also a step into a new and undefined danger zone.

**How you respond to me when I share with you matters significantly to me.**

Part of me felt guilty about opening up and talking about what was happening. I felt unclear about the difference between complaining and confiding. I also felt guilty for sharing the truth and speaking openly about his behaviour. There was often a sense of pity which was the last thing I wanted and I recognized withdrawal and judgment from some of the people I talked to. Often they would say, "oh you poor thing". I hate that, can't stand it! That response ultimately prevented me from wanting to share or be open about the circumstance I was in. I didn't want pity. What I needed was some supportive help.

When I did reach out, some people seemed afraid to get involved. What would that do to their life, their reputation? So, even if they wanted to help, most often they'd just disappear.

The most practical help I received was from a mother's group friend that I opened up to. She gave me \$500 — no strings attached. No repayment required. It's the most beneficial thing anybody's done. That \$500 meant I was able to change my locks, fix my bike (for transport), and buy bed linen and food. It was the first time I asked myself; what do I need? What would make the biggest difference and bring the most comfort?

Without services like 1 800-respect, I would not have felt it was possible to leave as I had no access to money. Also, they validated that what I was going through was domestic violence.

I am not out of the woods yet. My current income barely covers our food and rent. Life feels precarious. But, I am resourceful, and it's getting easier to take positive steps forward. I now say yes to life and ask for help when I need it.

**The quality of the responses I receive from others influences how I engage with social networks and service**

Since the split, I've noticed a great disparity between who we as a society are willing to stand by in times of crisis or need. For example, when a spouse passes away, or someone falls ill, friends, family, and community will often band together to support the bereaved through the upheaval and loss. But with domestic violence, there's still a lot of silence, shame, and stigma. Yet, it is a death. There's the loss of a family unit and loved ones that must be grieved. The difference is, the person causing the pain is alive, both in your mind and in your physical reality. There is no funeral. But YOUR life may well be at risk and very few people will be aware of the situation, let alone show up with a casserole!

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