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**Bec**

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.

## BEC

I look at my life in chapters and this is just a brief overview.

I was born into domestic violence. Both my father and my mother were abusive. It took me many years to get out of that.

My earliest recollection of violence was when I was around six or seven. We were outside in the backyard. I think we were just playing. And I don't know what mum was doing, hanging washing on the line or whatever. And then she and dad started fighting, which was pretty normal. He was probably accusing her of having affairs because that was pretty much a theme of what went on.

He was always very physically abusive. And then the next thing, he went for her, he struck her and then he strangled her, she passed out and he dragged her inside and up the passageway and threw her on the bed. He threw us into our room and then he went outside. I got up to go and check on my mum and I got a thrashing for that.

He wasn't an alcoholic, he was very sober, very 'with it'. My mother was probably just as abusive, and she had affairs. So, whether she was denying the affairs or making excuses as to why she has them, I don't know. My mechanism in growing up was to live in a fantasy world.

**I was able to ... put myself in my head. That's where I lived because it was better than the house.**

I was able to disassociate. Just take myself away from that and just put myself in my head into a TV show or whatever. That's where I lived because it was better than my house.

The TV and they were not real. But for me, they were real because they were actually better than my family. I liked the fact that they could be so different and not care that they were so different and not worry about how other people looked at them. They just did. And for them, that was their normal and they were so good at being that different and normal without worrying about what everybody thought.

The TV show, *The Addams Family*, became a reality for me. This really quirky, odd, strange family became so real that I lost touch of the fact that they're actually in

I lived in what looked like, from the outside, an exceptionally normal, exceptionally acceptable house. We were a middle to upper class family in Western Australia. My parents had been missionaries. We went to church on Sundays. They were pillars of the community. My mother

worked in Community Services. So, she worked with kids that were in domestic violence and yet our family was extremely violent.

It wasn't until I was much older that I found out that my surrogate aunts and uncles from the mission actually knew what was happening. And they'd tried to intervene but hadn't been able to. But I didn't know that until I was much older. If I was growing up in that family now, I would have been engaged by the Department of Human Services or would have been removed by the department.

When I was first born until I was six, we lived on an Aboriginal Mission where Mum and Dad were missionaries. It was dad's temper that got our family removed from the mission. And so, then we went to suburban Perth.

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**"I am always aware of the actual and possible responses of others."**

*Follow My Lead*

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My mum was five foot two and my dad was six foot four. She was tiny. He was huge. At 12, he broke my arm when I got in between him and mum. I just turned around and said pick on someone your own size and got in between them and he broke my wrist. I went to the doctors and when I came back, he said to me, "well, what did you tell him?" I said, "I told him I fell down the stairs". He said, "why did you tell him that?" And I said, "because I actually do love you and I don't want to see you go to jail." I played a lot of sport and climbed trees and was a bit of a tomboy, I guess the doctor figured that I was telling the truth. I grew up in a time when you didn't speak of family violence and my dad was a scary person especially if he was angry.

Did he feel guilty? Who knows? He just said to me, that he'd never hit me again. He promised and he didn't, he kept his word, but then he started to sexually abuse me.

We had been protecting dad from getting in trouble for years. Dad was really good when he hit us, he made sure it was never on our faces. And I didn't take friends home. I got to know when I shouldn't take friends home anymore. It's easy enough to protect somebody. You just don't say anything.

I protected him by not having friends, not really having close friends, by isolating myself. A good way to put it is that I became different people. So, the person that I was at school and the person that I was when I was out was not the same person that I was at home.

My mother's abuse was through her neglect, that's probably the best way I can put it. It really looked like neglect. I was the child she should never have had. Even in my 20s, I can remember ringing her at work one time and someone else answered the phone, and I said, it's (Mum's name) daughter calling. And they said, well, hi (sisters name), how are you? And I said, well, actually it's Bec. And she said, "I didn't realise she had another daughter."

**"I didn't realise that she had another daughter."**

I remember having a conversation with my mother at one stage and sitting down and talking to her and listening to what she was saying. I answered her back with a whole heap of shit, literally shit about something totally different. I knew she wasn't listening so I just deliberately spouted rubbish. This went on for about ten minutes. And I said to her, "are you actually listen to what I'm saying?"

She said, yes. And I said, what did I just say? She said, I don't know. I said, no, because you're actually not listening, why do you talk to me if you don't listen?

That was pretty normal.

When I was a child, my brother had epilepsy which he got when he was 10. So, mum focused a lot of her energy on him and that was fine because I loved him to bits; he was absolutely beautiful. He was always good to me. Mum also focused on my sister, she was just gorgeous, tall, long hair, absolutely beautiful. Mum got her into modelling, made all the clothes for her, focused around that. I was a tomboy. I was just a tomboy that climbed trees. Great place to hide, up a tree; no-one can find you.

So, for her, if I wanted to talk about something or do something, it was always, 'later' or 'in a minute'. And 'later' and 'in a minute,' never came. Even as I got older and I went through financial trouble and I asked them if they would help me out. Could they go guarantor on a loan? No, they couldn't do that. It was just... I don't know. Someone they should never have had. It was made really clear from an early age that I was not a priority.

Mum's always told me I was not the child she wanted. I was not the child she expected to have. I should have been a boy, or I should have been twins or I should have been something else. But I certainly shouldn't have been who I was.

My brother was older. He put a lot of his energy into protecting me. He'd stand up in front of dad. He was the one that was there for me. He taught me how to fight. If he went out with his friends and things like that, he always used to take me with him so that I was never left at home with dad. We were close until he died when he was 16.

We believe his death was a result of my father's abuse. I think that had it been now, we would probably find that he had a brain tumour and that the beatings that we took around the head were what possibly had caused him to grow the way that he did. He was on epilepsy medication, but it didn't help. He was constantly getting worse. Whether they did an autopsy, I don't know. I found him in the morning, he'd died in his sleep. He'd been stepping in between me and my father because I was standing up to him.

I was 13 when he passed away, he was two and a half years older than me. My sister was still at home at that point, but her boyfriend used to live with us too. And then they went off and had a baby.

My sister and I have never been very close, probably closer in the last 12 months than we have ever been. She has tried to strangle me too. She used to hold me up against the wall till I turned blue.

I was devastated when my brother died. I didn't understand it, so I couldn't expect people that I was trying to build connections with to understand it, could I? They don't. And I think that put me in a more isolated space. I was the kid whose brother died. "What do we say to her?"

I got involved with a drama group, which turned out to be another place where all the females were sexually abused too. So, I think because of that, I really felt that I was a magnet for this, and I deserved it. I really did believe that I deserved it. There must be something about me that meant it was okay to do that to me. It was hard to come to any other conclusion, at that point.

I became a person that didn't like to be touched.

The first time my mother left, I was 12, but she came back. And then the second time she left, I was 14, I stayed behind with my father and Mum went to New South Wales.

Mum had decided to become a mature-aged student and she did a social work degree. And she decided she would do a work placement in New South Wales at a psychiatric hospital there. She was only going for a short period of time. But in that time, she met her second husband. So that short period of time became a long period.

My older sister left home quite early. She had a good relationship with my mother, and they went off and did whatever, and I went to live in Perth with my father, who had stopped belting me by that stage.

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**“My feelings are ethical emotional responses to violence.”** *Follow My Lead*

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At one stage, I became a real bully. I took my anger and frustration out on others and solved everything with my fists and by fighting. Then I became quite reclusive because I didn't like being that person. Then I threw myself into my schoolwork. When my brother died, and things went pear shaped and everything, I left home. I wasn't so isolated. I had a set group of friends and I had a boyfriend that I'd met when I was 15.

He got me into things like motorbike riding, scuba diving, parasailing, hang gliding, extreme sports, anything that was high adrenaline, but I've never really formed close relationships. I still don't trust people. I do, but I don't, if that makes sense. I keep people pretty much at arm's length. I learnt to disassociate from very young age if I was in a situation like if my Dad abused me in some way.

The sexual abuse by my father started after the physical abuse.

It started off with him grabbing my breasts or he'd try and put his hand down my top or that sort of thing. And then he started coming into my room at night. And I heard him saying to me, “in some cultures, fathers initiate their daughters.” And that just threw the shit out of me. So, he decided that that would be what he should do, ‘initiate’ his daughter. It was like this damned idea, “what the fuck?”

I would disassociate myself and I would go, “it's okay. Tomorrow is another day. You're not here. You're here. It's all right. You can do this. You can get through this.”

I told my mother what was happening in the house and she said “you're mistaken, darling. That's not happening.” I said, okay, I'm mistaken. That was my mother's answer to everything.

She saw the physical abuse. She saw that and when I told her about the sexual abuse, she said I ‘was’ mistaken, not I ‘must be’ mistaken... She said it ‘wasn't happening’. I ‘was’ mistaken. And then she said to me, “but he never believed you were his daughter anyway.”

**“In some cultures, fathers initiate their daughters.”**

**“But he never believed you were his daughter anyway.”**

I'd grown up with her saying to me he never believed I was his daughter. And I guess, I don't know, I just felt isolated. I just felt really isolated, really alone. I didn't have anywhere to go, and I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go through school. I wanted to do journalism. I wanted to do so much, but I couldn't do it. There was no one that I trusted, I had no safe person or safe place, I didn't see how my life would change or get any better if I stayed where I was. I thought, "The only way I can do this is to leave home," and at 16 I just left.

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"The risks I face change over time and can change rapidly." *Follow My Lead*

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He wasn't the only one who sexually abused me.

To give you some background; I was sexually assaulted when I was six by the neighbour across the road. And no, I didn't tell my parents, but yes, I knew what had happened. They sent me to get some milk and I was gone for two and a half hours. I came back covered in baby powder, clothes inside out, dishevelled. But I didn't say anything because I was really scared because if something happened, I must have done something wrong.

So, I never talked about it. And I guess I felt from that, I deserved what happened to me. So, whatever he was doing, I figured I deserved that. That's what I was worth.

I look at it now and I know I never deserved that. But I think it was because nobody ever told me. Nobody pushed to find out what went wrong. Nobody sat down and talked to me and said it was okay. They were just angry. They were angry I was back late. They were angry I hadn't been where I was supposed to be.

I knew that they knew what had happened. Little girls don't come home with their dress inside out and covered in baby powder. Something had to have happened.

I was in trouble because I hadn't gone down to the shops, got the milk and came back late.

I was in trouble as a 6-year-old. So, I'm not going to say anything. I'm not going to get into more trouble. And then remember, I've got my mother telling me that my father doesn't believe I'm his daughter anyway. It just seemed like this logical conversation. I just thought that I must deserve this.

I was upset because I had to see the person that did it to me every day, the neighbour. Every day, I saw that person and I knew that he felt he had some sort of power over me. You know when somebody looks at you as if to say they know they've gotten away with something because nothing's happened, because I hadn't said anything.

I was a little girl and he was probably about 19 at the time. I haven't said anything. How do I say something when I hadn't said anything day after day? How do I then say something? I couldn't.

So, this is playing through my mind when my father sexually abuses me; I deserve this. I deserve it. And I guess the other thing is too when I was looking for love and acceptance and I want something other than being bashed, I just thought, well, I don't know. I just block it out. It saves being beaten. I was not an active participant. I was just there not doing anything.

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"I must hide my resistance, sometimes completely, and find a safe place in the privacy of my mind." *Follow My Lead*

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In terms of my body and what I was doing, I was not doing anything physically that was being done to me, I'm away in my mind. My mind's fine. I'm not there. I've gone. Anywhere that wasn't there. Sometimes I would just go into that thought pattern of "it's okay. Tomorrow's another day, it's okay. Tomorrow's another day."

I don't really know where that's come from, but it's always been there, every time something's gone wrong. "It's okay. Tomorrow's another day. It's okay. Tomorrow's another day. Just get through this. It's all right. Just get through this. Tomorrow's another day. It might be the same shit, but it's still another day. It might not be the same shit, too. It might be something different."

**"It's okay.  
Tomorrow's another  
day. Just get through  
this. It's all right."**

I wanted friends and I wanted to have people like me. But being a bully wasn't working. People didn't like me when I treated them the same way that I'd been treated. I wasn't a nice person. I tried a range of different strategies, but I was trying to be somebody

that wasn't me, I really don't know who I was. I often did things that were pretty stupid. I often said things that I wish I hadn't said. So, there's this level of embarrassment. I think, "God, I can't face that." So, I retreated. I pull back because I'm after connection and I'm after friendship. But I didn't have any decent role models in terms of how to build functional relationships.

You can't be a friend if you don't know how to be a friend. If you haven't got the foundations, you're lost. I was looking at different people and how they do things and I was taking that on, but I didn't have the foundations that they've had. So, I was only taking on what they're putting across to the outside world. And that didn't work for me because it's shallow.

I was trying to be part of the popular group, which isn't the place I really to want to be, because I actually didn't know who I was, I didn't know how to attract people to me who are like me, who are like-minded. And I didn't want to attract people to me who are living in the same circumstances as I was either, but I did.

I left school before I finished my year 12, I really would have loved to have finished school.

I went to work at a bank. Never having had much money, I worked out how I could get some; how I could rob the bank. I could open a passbook account. And then I could go and withdraw the money from another branch. And then when it came back to our bank, there wouldn't be an account for it to go too, but I had the money. After I did it, I felt so sick. I felt so ill. I stole about \$3,000 and I felt so sick, I turned myself in.

I was 17 and so I went to children's court and they released me into the care of my mother on a good behaviour bond. But the thing was that she was going back to NSW. So, I didn't go with her I just stayed in Perth. That was the end of my banking career.

Then I worked for a few different people. I worked for a doctor and that was really interesting. I worked in their computer room. Then I worked as a secretary. It was challenging and I really liked that challenge. But I wanted to belong somewhere, which is why I joined the Defence Force.

I met my partner in the Defence Force. We were very good friends, amazing friends and my other friends were getting married and I was looking for security. And he asked me to marry him, so I did. The marriage lasted three years.

We decided that we wanted to do a few things and we got a credit card, it was an American Express card in my name. At that stage American Express cards did not have a limit. But we were in the Defence Force and we made good money.

He had a bad credit rating and he told me that the credit card would need to be in my name. I'm thinking this guy loves me. He's married to me, he's committed. I wanted someone to love me. I wanted someone to care for. And I just thought, well, you married me. So, you must love me. You must care about me.

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**“They may steal, control or undermine my finances, or my ability to work or be financially independent.”** *Follow My Lead*

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I was posted to Malaysia for six weeks and I'd actually said to him, “things aren't working, and I want to look at this when I come back.” I came back to find that we had all new furniture in the house. We had a whole heap of new things and I just hit the roof and asked what possessed him. And he said, “well, you can't go if you've got to pay this off, can you? We can't afford for one of us to do this on their own. It's got to be jointly done.” It was all in my name. I took that debt with me when I left him.

It wasn't until after we got married that he started sexually abusing me. I found out probably eight months into the marriage that he really preferred men, not women. We got posted back to his home town and he got caught back up with this group of friends. He was very perverse in a sexual way and looking back on this I can see that he had been grooming me towards his lifestyle and preferences from when we first met. I was gullible, naive and desperately wanting to be loved and to belong. I started to feel not well within myself.

I found out that he'd been drugging me and there were movies that were being taken. He was drugging me every time. I'm not going to go into it too much. But I decided that, I'd rather not be there anymore. I tried to hang myself. I didn't know how to deal with that. That was something I really didn't know how to deal with.

One of the sergeants in the centre we both worked in, called around to see me because he knew that things weren't going well within my marriage. What I didn't realise was that things weren't going well within his marriage and I'm not sure, but I think he thought that I would be an easy mark. So his reasons for calling around were not terribly pure, but he came around and found me hanging in the garage under the house because I'd had enough.

He cut me down and took me to the hospital, not the military one because it would go on my record and it wouldn't be a good thing.

In the end, I think I was thankful for him not taking me to the military hospital.

My parents had been up to visit a couple of weeks previous and I found out later that mum said that she never thought she would see me again... She had thought that was the end of me and that she wouldn't see me again after that. Which really annoyed me because I thought “if you felt that, why didn't you do something? Why didn't you step in?”

She could clearly see that I was not in a good place. It showed my mum didn't care. My sister told me that. She said mum told her about that and I said, "why didn't she step in? Why didn't she say something? Why didn't she do something? She was a bloody social worker."

My first husband's father was accused of being a paedophile. And my first husband sat down with me one day and said he couldn't see anything wrong with what his father had done. That was very alarming.

I tried to leave, but financially he made it impossible. I had about \$40,000 worth of debt because he just kept piling the debt into my name. He tried to get me committed to the psychiatric ward at a local hospital. Being in the Defence Force, I had to go for the psychiatric interview, and I had to be with him. The psychiatrist I saw said, "there's nothing wrong with you, the problem is your marriage." That response was significant. Because I had started to feel I was going mad.

**"There's nothing wrong with you, the problem is your marriage."**

When someone tells you often enough that you're an idiot, that you're an imbecile, that you're mad, you start to feel that you are actually mad. I was constantly questioned. I was asking people, "am I really doing the wrong thing? Am I really that bad? Do I really suck that much?"

I moved to live on the Defence Force base. My first husband and I were in the same operations centre and had the same boss. I just said to my boss that "my relationship's over. He's actually stalking me. I can't deal with it. And I'm not safe." My commanding officer moved me into another role. But they felt that I was being very overreactive and that the things I was saying weren't really happening. So, then I applied for a transfer posting and they agreed to transfer me to another unit. But then they said to me, I would have to come back. And I said, "I can't come back while he's there. I want a transfer out of this state. I want to go to another base."

In the end it blew up and they started to believe me because when I put in for the transfer, I got called in and they asked when was I leaving? I said the end of the week. And they said, "can you be ready to go within 24 hours?" And I said, "why?" And they said, "because your ex-husband has put in for leave at the same time that you're leaving." And they just said, "we're really concerned about your safety." I'm not sure what had happened, but something had happened, and they started to take me seriously.

I got transferred interstate. I found out after, that because he couldn't get to me, he was stalking a good friend of mine and he was trying to find out through her what I was doing, what my movements were and all of that. And she had the fortitude to say something. She spoke to the boss and that gave more weight to my story

When I got my new posting, I hadn't had any counselling. It was at the time that the grim reaper ads where on TV, and the AIDS campaign had started, I hardly slept and was having nightmares that he had given me aids. I was in a new place and had gotten no counselling, nothing through this period and I had a bit of a meltdown.

I lost my block at a squadron leader; I don't even know what it was about. I think he just said something the wrong way. He probably ordered me to do something and I just lost it at him. My

response was to his control, to him being a higher rank, the tone of his voice and body language and feeling that I was being treated as inferior. I was about to be court marshalled, but instead I ended up with the senior medical officer with him talking to me and working out what was happening for me.

He was probably one of the most open people that I've ever spoken to, to be able to talk openly and honestly with me without any judgment, without offering me any solutions.

## He was someone who listened and just let me know his door was always open.

He was someone who listened and just let me know his door was always open. And I think that probably, in some ways, was the most powerful thing I've been given. It was at a crucial time that that happened.

There was a period of probably three or maybe four years before I met my second husband, when I moved state again.

I did have a relationship in that time, but it wasn't a good one. It was a different sort of abuse. He was a gorgeous guy, love him to bits, but he couldn't have one woman in his life. He doesn't know what to do with one woman. He can't manage any more, but he can't settle on one woman. And so, he's got a string of them.

I went back to school in my late 20s and started to do a psych degree, but I got really ill. So, then I studied counselling. When I was in my late 30s I was still looking at studying psych, but then I thought that I didn't want to be a psychologist.

And then I got extremely ill and I ended up in New South Wales for a while. I met my girls' dad while I was in New South Wales. I'd been on my own probably for 18 months at that stage.

He was a single dad with two kids. He's a misogynist. He was really good in the beginning. He was absolutely brilliant, it was a whirlwind romance, he did all the right things, treated me like a princess, really great. The day we got married, it's like a switch flipped.

The next morning, it was like he was a totally different person. All of a sudden, "what are you doing? Where are you going? Who are you with? Who are you talking to? What did you say to your parents? What did you say to her? What did they say to you?"

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"I am experienced in anticipating the patterns and tactics that the person abusing me uses against me." *Follow My Lead*

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I'm pretty good at being evasive. I was pregnant at the time and I would just look and say, "Mum just wants to know how the pregnancy was going" or she just wanted to know about this. He would question me "But you were talking for a long time." If it was mum, I'd say, "she's having a bitch about dad." Or if it was my sister, I'd say, "she's having a bitch about her husband." I learnt to be very, very evasive about my conversations and what I was doing and what I was saying. I learnt to lie very well. I was incredibly skilful in terms of saying the things that I needed to say to stay safe. And so were my kids but it was really upsetting, scary and worrying.

With that relationship I'd already made it really clear to him "if you ever lay a hand on me, that's it, I'll have you charged." So, he made sure that he didn't lay a hand on me, didn't he? I'd already been

## “If you ever lay a hand on me, that’s it, I’ll have you charged.”

through a lot of physical abuse I wasn’t going to put up with it again. But abuse comes in many forms, in that relationship he did a lot of gaslighting of me and financial abuse. He did everything except physical abuse.

We had five kids at home, and I wasn’t aware that he was abusing the kids. I would go shopping on my own and he would be laying into the kids. He was telling the youngest, who were biologically mine, how he was going to kill me and dispose of my body, and no one would ever know where I was if they didn’t do the things that he was saying to do. And if they told me, that he’d probably kill us all. He was quite graphic in describing how he would kill me. He would tell them that no one would ever know, that he could get rid of me. We’re talking about three and six-year-olds at the time, and he was also hitting them and all those sorts of things while I wasn’t around.

I used to wonder about it towards the end because I’d say I was going shopping and the kids were going, “no, no, no mum, can we come with you?” But having all the little ones, I would perpetually say, “no, mummy won’t be very long.”

How it came out was, my ex-husband and I had separated, and I’d been gone for two weeks. After the two weeks, we’d had some discussions and I’d moved back in, but he would have to live downstairs and only if he came to counselling. Then I would see how things were going. He agreed to that and the first 48 hours were fine, and he did everything he was told. But then things started to heat up again. I knew, I could see the tension in his body, his clenched fist, his anger that’s now being directed towards me. The bashing of a fist through a door. And I knew that if I didn’t do something soon, I was going to be the next one that’s going to get that fist.

While my sister and I might not get on, she’s certainly somebody that I would let know about what was happening because she lived fairly close by. I had another good friend and he’d come down from the Northern Territory and was working in the area. He knew what was going on. My sister and my friend knew each other, and I had really specifically shared things with them, so that they knew to keep an eye on me.

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“How you respond to me when I share with you, and in the time that follows, matters significantly to me.” *Follow My Lead*

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So, when I had both of them trying to get hold of me for a 12-hour period. They spoke to each other and neither of them were able to get hold of me and they were both really concerned. They’d been ringing the house phone, they’d been ringing my mobile phone, and hadn’t been able to get hold of me because the ex had taken the phone off the hook and he had my mobile phone. Nobody could get hold of me and so they rang the police to do a welfare check. The police arrived at midnight and the ex was pretty angry.

They said to my husband at the time that they wanted to sight the children and myself, he said, “whatever”. The police officer came up stairs and we were all asleep, together, on the master bed all fully clothed. It was a deliberate decision (to sleep fully clothed). I knew that if I needed to go, that I needed to be able to go quickly.

The copper woke me up and asked if I was okay, and I said, “yes” I was. And he said, “we would like it if you would come to the station tomorrow please, we just want to have a talk.” They said that in front of my husband. And I said “yes, of course.” And he said, “we’d like you to bring the children

with you.” It was important that he said that in front of him.

They were making it clear, so that he knew that I hadn’t just gone in there on my own decision, which would have made it really worse for the kids and I. By saying they wanted to see me. It wasn’t, “we want to see you, can you confirm,” it wasn’t, “pop down if you’re worried love,” it was, “you need to come in.”

When I went down to the police station, I’ve got to be honest, I was walking in there and I was thinking, “I don’t know what I’m doing this for, this is a waste of time. What are they going to do? What are they going to say?” But they were just lovely. One of the police officers was the mother of one of the kids that my children went to school with, so they knew her quite well. There was another young copper there who had been the one who had come to our house the night before. Because we went in quite early, they’d asked me to come in at that particular time. He said “I’m so glad to see you, it’s really good that you’ve come in. I’m going off shift now, but I want you to have a talk to these two coppers”. I said “yes, no worries.” And I must admit, I probably downplayed it a little bit.

**“I’m so glad to see you, it’s really good that you’ve come in.”**

The copper asked me, “do you mind if we speak to your children?” And I looked at him and I said “well...” then they said, “we believe that the kids know this constable.” I said they did, that they knew her well, “are you happy if we fetch the children if she’s there?” I said yes, “I don’t have a problem with that if the kids are happy to talk to you. I said if they’re not happy to talk to you, then no.”

So, they went off with their friend’s mum, the constable, quite happily. When the children spoke to the police, they came out and said all these things that were happening at home. What he was saying about me, and that he was planning to kill me and dispose of my body and I would never be found. Had they not taken the time to actually listen to what the kids had to say without me around, we would never have known that this is what they were going through with their dad when I wasn’t home.

After speaking to the kids, the copper came out he said I think we need to have a discussion; “you won’t be going back to the house.”

The intervention order was put on after the girls spoke to the police. They immediately had an interim AVO put out. I didn’t take the order out, the police took it out, but when the AVO was taken out, my husband kept saying to me, “get this taken off. You put it on, you take it off”. And I said well actually, “I didn’t put it on, the police put it on. And the police put it on based on what the children have said, and what they’ve witnessed, and what they saw, and what other people have said. So, I’m sorry, it’s not up to me to take this off.”

I was really shocked. I’ve got to admit that the police supported me through the whole process of the intervention order, even when I turned up at court. My ex-husband turned up, and he was coming to talk to me, and the copper got in front of him and said “no, we don’t want you having anything to do with her.” They were really good the whole process through.

**The copper got in front of him and said, “no, we don’t want you having anything to do with her.”**

I was scared, very scared of my ex-husband. Even though he had never physically done anything to me, I was very scared of him and scared of what he could do. And not because he'd said anything to me, but I did at times think he could possibly kill all of us. I was actually petrified. So, for the police to do this and for me to go to court and to face him, I was even more petrified as to what the consequences were going to be.

To have two police officers that were with me the whole time, who seemed to understand that fear, and how afraid I was and the fact that they actually showed that they were concerned about my safety and the children's safety, was really important.

At court I didn't know how things would turn out, I wasn't required to say anything before going into court. The police brought forward the application, and I didn't have to say anything at all.

And the judge apparently asked my ex-husband about it and he started to say something, and the judge turned around and said, "we can take this to trial if that's what you'd like to do?" And all of a sudden, he turned around and went, "no, fine, whatever."

At the time he'd given me a car that was blowing up, and as part of the intervention order he had to hand over his other four-wheel drive to me, he was really angry about that. He did have four other cars, so he was only handing over one, what can I say? He had 24 hours in which to do it, and he had to take that to the police station, not to me. Like I said, the police were absolutely amazing.

Those police were the first ones who actually listened, but they listened to my kids too. They were just so instrumental in listening and believing that something was happening. This was the first time I was getting a positive response from people in a position to do anything and I was 40 years old.

When we left, the Family Court said that the kids still had to go back and spend time with him every year. And because it wasn't that level of violence that I'd grown up in, it wasn't that physical abuse, they still had to go back. The kids were very angry about that.

I found Family Court to be the most unhelpful.

It was a frightening and scary time for me. Because all of a sudden, I was being asked to look at a whole lot of things in my life. Not just that relationship. I was being asked to look at how I got to that point and all the relationships that led me to that point. Suddenly, it was very real. There was no hiding in The Addams Family. Where do I go from here? How do I have a foundation? How do I build a foundation so that my daughters have healthy relationships?

**The kids were trying to strategise around staying safe. They were very good at that.**

The kids were trying to strategise around staying safe. They were very good at that. They all had their own different ways. Some helpful, some not so helpful. One ended up with an eating disorder, she was a really controlled eater and ended up with anorexia and bulimia. The other one, she's naturally very ordered in her life, love her to bits. She has become a lawyer because that's where she needs to be these days. They have all gone into professions where they're helping.

One no longer talks to their father at all. She's disowned him. And the other one, says to me, "it's all right. I can deal with him, I don't have to deal with him very often". And the youngest one, well, she says, "it's okay, mum. I just talk to him as though he's not my father."

My kids all have very healthy relationships. They're very strong. They don't take anyone disrespecting them at all. They're not afraid to stand up and say what they feel and what they think, which I think is amazing. It's wonderful. Sometimes I think, "my God, you shouldn't say that. You shouldn't do that." I think, God, that's going to cause a shit fight. I hear that, and sense trouble. I get worried that their partner will respond violently. That's still really ingrained in me.

But they've had very different relationships to me. And while I was able to put a lot of positive things in place for them, they didn't understand why I would have this fear and apprehension because they didn't have the foundations that I had.

I have had to learn to back off when they were standing up for themselves, and to know it's going to be okay. That's how I brought them up, to not accept that kind of behaviour. I honestly don't know how I did that, and to this day, I don't really know how they've turned out so good.

One of the hardest things if you're leaving (an abusive person), is if you don't have a good family foundation and if the men in your life have been violent, controlling and manipulative you don't have those supports to fall back on. If you do it's really good. But I just didn't have those supports.

There's a lot of people that don't have those supports to fall back on and there's nothing there to really support them. I had people saying that I should do this, and I should do that. I went to counselling services and they'd say what I needed to do. But they often never looked at me and saw me from the strengths that I had. They didn't ask me, "what did you do to survive?"

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**"The violence I experience is an affront to my dignity."** *Follow My Lead*

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What I did was, I shut my mouth. I gave in to sex because it made it easier. I got up at five o'clock in the morning and I made his breakfast and sent him off to work instead of staying in bed even though I had only gotten to bed at two o'clock in the morning because I had a screaming baby. But that's okay. I still got up. I made sure that the kids were all fed before he got home and that they were kept quiet and didn't disturb him. These were the things that I was doing to stay safe.

In the relationships that I have had - my parents, my first marriage, my second marriage and any relationships that I've had - they have all been abusive in different ways, but very, very abusive.

It has caused me many bouts of anxiety. My body would be just screaming at me that there's danger. All the time. And it's not because it's my danger, but I had no control over that. I'm learning to deal with that. My kids are adults now. They have control over their lives and I'm learning to be ok with that too. They're very good at saying, "mum, not your problem."

**My responses were really logical, and they kept me alive.**

I've learnt to recognise what that anxiety is. When it first happened, I didn't. I just knew that I was anxious. My stomach would churn. I would churn. I would be constantly on the go. I couldn't settle. I couldn't sit. But I've learnt that my responses were really logical, and they kept me alive.

But when I was safe enough to remove my children from danger, and I would leave them in a safe

place, I would still respond in the same way, feeling that anxiety even if they were not necessarily in a dangerous place.

I was teaching them ways to respond that are no longer helpful, but nobody takes the time to go through that with you and say “I understand why you do this”. It wasn't until much later when I became a counsellor that I was able to understand why I did the things I did. That really validated things for me that what I was doing was what I needed to do to survive.

I can help other people with their anxiety really well. I'm really good at that. Nobody ever told me, that by being anxious about something I thought was a danger, I was also teaching my kids that this was something for them to be anxious about. Nobody ever told me that I could do that; that by how I reacted, I was teaching them how to react.

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

*Follow My Lead*

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I spent a lot of time in counselling, there were some pieces that worked but often it was traumatising; in many ways it was really unhelpful.

When I went to counselling, they wanted to take my foundations away, but these very dysfunctional foundations are all I've got. They want to swipe that away from me but there's nothing to replace it. I've grown up in this abusive place, and they're wanting to swipe these very dysfunctional foundations away from me because they're not working, which, sure, they're not working, but they're not replacing it with anything. They're telling me what I *need* to do, what I *should* do. But counselling doesn't work that way. I think of it like a cake. If the cake is my foundation, I can't take all the cake away. But what I can do is I can cut it up into pieces and I can find the most dysfunctional pieces of my cake and I can take that out. And I can find something else that's been more positive and less dysfunctional and put that into my cake. I can change pieces of the foundation, so it becomes a more functional foundation.

When I was a kid, it was easy. People would see the bruises. They would see the broken bones. That was easy. In my second marriage when I wouldn't accept the physical abuse anymore, that didn't mean I didn't take the emotional abuse, the financial abuse and all those things. But people can't see that stuff. That's not in their head and in their reality, but it was worse than the physical abuse.

**“What's helpful ... is if you've got a counsellor who will listen without judgment, without trying to tell you what to do.”**

So, what's helpful in the process, is if you've got a counsellor who will listen without judgment, and without trying to tell you what to do. Helping me identify the things that I see as being very toxic or dysfunctional within my life. And helping me identify which things I want to change and how, rather than coming and saying, “this isn't working for you, this isn't how it should be, you can't have that, you've got to go and do this.”

When you're with a counsellor who's able to ask, “what are you finding that's unhealthy?” for example, I could say, “well, I find it really unhealthy that I used to get angry about everything, and I

scream, and I yell, and we don't have a conversation, and I'm ready to hit my kids." Then you're working with someone who says, "how would you like that to be?" So, how I would like that to be is the fantasy that I think can happen, which is really unrealistic too. But with the right person, you're working to find what is realistic and getting strategies to put in place as to how that can look. How I want it to look. It's not how the counsellor tells you it should be.

That idea of believing that I must have deserved it probably didn't change until my 40s and I had left my second husband. I've been on my own for 20 years now. It changed when I started to become a counsellor, when I started to do a lot of work on me. I'd been going to a therapist, but it was the study more than anything else that helped. If I was going to help somebody else, I had to learn how to help myself first.

I had all these skills to keep myself safe, my fists, my lies, my gut alerting me to danger or going elsewhere in my mind. But none of them were helpful anymore. I don't use my fists anymore because it's not right. I can't tolerate lies because it's deception. Going off into my own space doesn't allow me to build meaningful and healthy relationships. So, I had a whole heap of strategies, but none of them are helping me anymore. None. None of them gave me that healthy life that I needed. I wish someone had taught me how to love myself.

I couldn't build healthy relationships because every relationship has centred around a physical thing. If I was good in bed, then I had a good relationship. If I put out, then I had a good relationship. When I didn't put out, when I wanted it to be more than that, then I didn't have a good relationship. So obviously that's what I had to offer. That was all I really had to offer that anybody really wanted, which was going to make anything okay.

The pieces I had, those dysfunctional pieces, were also incredibly functional as well because I wouldn't have survived without them. They were the only functional pieces I knew. But I think one of the things is that when I was in that violence, then people can see that I was are vulnerable, without support and they preyed on me and that's not helpful in moving forward.

I've met some amazing people in my lifetime. I've met some amazing men in my lifetime who I think in the long term would have been very, very good for me and very good to me. But I didn't feel at that point in my life that I deserved them. They were too good for me. That wasn't where I fit. I wasn't that sort of person. I was the person who could deal very well with the abuser. So, going back to the cake and the pieces that had kept me safe. I keep those pieces. I always keep those pieces.

I wanted a healthy relationship, but I didn't think I deserved it. If someone comes up to me that I know is going to be red flags, that's easy. I know what to do with that. I know how to walk away from that. I know how to say, "it's not okay." But if someone comes up that's probably halfway decent, I look and say I probably don't deserve you. I don't feel on an equal footing. On my own, I know I'm very strong. I know I can achieve, and I know I can do it.

Financially, I'm never going to be in a good place because that's life now and that's okay. But I don't feel on an equal footing regarding my life experience or financially. It's not to say that my life experience is any less, it's just very different from somebody who's never experienced any real adversity, it's very hard for them to see where I've come from.

I spent my whole life trying to prove myself to somebody else; that I was okay. That I was worthwhile. That I was good person. And then accepting whatever they gave me. If what they gave

me was physical, then I accepted that that's what my worth was. I didn't know how to love myself. I didn't even know how to like myself. Nobody taught me how to like myself or love myself. Everybody can tell me what's wrong and that I don't need to put up with that kind of behaviour. But no one helped me find a solution. My studies helped me to understand that I was the only one who could find the right solution for me, but it would be nice to have support and guidance on the journey.

I like to be able to help people in everyday things. I finished my counselling degree. Then I came to town and was working with victims of crime, which I absolutely loved. After finishing the counselling, I worked through different things. When my daughter got really sick and I stopped working and I stayed home and did reflexology and massage. I mowed lawns for a year. I did what I needed to do because she needed me to be at home.

Then I started working in schools as a teacher's assistant because that meant I had school holidays off and I could still be with my kids. My youngest went to Melbourne and I went with her working in schools. And I worked doing counselling again because I hadn't worked in it for a while, I really liked that. I like that space. I've since picked up my psych degree again. I've got a few months left.

Then I got offered this job, in domestic violence. It's a good space. I'm not working in a therapeutic role. I'm in a referral role. But I'm also the first person, for instance, to hear a person's story and to support the risk assessment and safety planning for them. In this role I offer empathy but not everyone is ready for empathy especially if they feel some guilt around the fact that they too may also be an abuser. It's talking to people and hopefully getting them to a place that they feel safe enough and trust you enough to share their story or some of it.

When I counsel people, they say "You don't tell us what we need to do. You don't tell us this." And I say, "I don't." I talk about their rights and what rights have been violated. And I talk about the fact that loving yourself and respecting yourself is where it starts. It's not about putting somebody else down anymore. It's about you and what's right for you. And until you learn that, you're constantly trying to prove yourself to other people until somebody helps you to understand it's about you.

**"You don't tell us what we need to do."**

You have to look at the strengths that they've got. And even if those strengths are toxic, and even if those strengths are not what we would normally say is a good thing in society, we have to look and say, look that is really a strength. "Okay, so this is what you do to protect your children, or this is what you do to protect yourself. Well, that's a really strong thing to do. Do you think that's still working for you now?"

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

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There are more people working this way, but I still see a lot of organisations coming from a blame and a place of power and control. It's an, "I'm better than you because I've never been there." But, that's it, they haven't been there. Walk a hundred miles in my shoes and maybe you'll have an understanding of some of where I've been. But not all of it, because I'm not there anymore.

When I work with people I'll go, "yes, let's see how we can help you with this journey. You can hold their hand, but you can't talk for them, and you can't tell them what to do."

I talk about this journey. I wouldn't wish my life on anyone to be honest. But I wouldn't do what I do today if I hadn't lived it. And I don't know how to put that any other way. I wouldn't work with these people if I hadn't lived this life. And, one of the most rewarding things I've ever done is to watch people become empowered in their own life.

It is re-learning, but it has to come from me wanting to, not you telling me that I have to. I'm not broken, and I don't need to be fixed and the only person that can save me is myself.

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### 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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