

MY LIVED EXPERIENCE INSIGHTS OF DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

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INSIGHT EXCHANGE

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Insight Exchange centres on the expertise of people with lived experiences of violence and gives voice to these experiences. It is designed to inform and strengthen social, service and systemic responses to domestic and family violence

The insight component of [Insight Exchange](http://www.insightexchange.net) 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.

Sam has shared some of her experiences, insights and reflections, mapped against questions and focus areas explored in the insight Exchange **My Safety Kit** resource.

My Safety Kit - is a reflection resource that speaks in the voice of the reader who may be reflecting on their own relationships and (possible) experiences of domestic and family violence.

What did I hope for and what is going on in this relationship?

When I first met him, I did not like him, I thought he was just a pathetic human. However, I think women are kind of taught to be nurturers and carers, and I think part of that narrative was going on with me: It was my job to make him better because he's clearly crap and needs help.

At the same time, there was kindness in him, there was fun in him. And when you know someone like that well, when you're living with them, and you see those sides to them, you look for those positives, and you look for the potential in someone. I think women do that a lot for their partners. We see the good bits, and we want them to be their best self.

When you get those moments and times of kindness, and love, and caring, and fun, and you want it to be like that more. You want to work with them to try and bring that out of them more, because you know it's in there. You know it's possible.

So, you're always working towards that potential of those good times being the normal reality. I don't think he necessarily thought he was doing anything wrong at any stage.

RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHOICES

I am wondering about some things... Are my rights and boundaries respected? Can I safely talk about what I am and am not comfortable with?

If I went out with friends without him, I would receive a litany of abusive text messages that would escalate. They'd start with, he knew where I was and who I was with, but then he would start making accusations that I was out trying to pick up another man, that I was dressed as a slut, that I was out with sluts - degrading me to try and keep me at home. So, that was undermining my boundaries of personal freedom, which was really confronting and hard. I felt very shameful about that. I remember trying to hide my phone and the messages from my friends when I was out with them.

I could be myself to a degree but not to the point of expressing displeasure with him, per se. That wasn't safe to do. I've learned to keep a lot of my own thoughts and feelings to myself because that feels safer when you're dealing with someone whose thoughts, and feelings, and emotions are bigger or more dangerous than yours.

He also facilitated and encouraged my drug use and drug dependency. So, I developed an addiction to marijuana during our relationship. I think for me, it was a coping mechanism, but also because he was bringing it into the house and giving it to me, and offering it to me, and sharing it with me. At times where I didn't necessarily want that for myself, it was pushed on me, encouraged. "It's all right, that's what we do together." I know I ended up using marijuana to dull my reality and escape internally from how I was feeling at being degraded by him.

MATERIAL BASICS AND ECONOMIC WELLBEING

“The person abusing me tries to suppress my resistance by limiting my access to material basics such as food, housing, clothing and money, as well as assets and economic opportunities including study or employment. If they can undermine my material and economic wellbeing, they will be more able to use violence.”

He was irresponsible with money. So, there'd be a conversation about, well, this is how we'll make contributions and split them, but then he wouldn't stick to it. I was often left having to pay the bills, even though he earned more money than me.

He didn't own up to that and go, “yes, I know I've done the wrong thing.” He was defensive; “I earn my money and I'll spend it.” And not ever an apology, he'd never say “I see how I've spent the rent money and the money for food shopping. I see how that puts all the responsibility on you to keep everything going.” Never that kind of acknowledgement, at all.

While he would go out almost every day after work to the pub, I was expected to go home and have dinner ready. Really obvious, basic enforcement of gender role stuff. But because of the fear I had in the relationship and wanting to avoid fights or him being angry at me, I would do that. Also, I think I am a bit more of a homebody, and my response to stress is to turn inwards and not necessarily seek outward help, so, I think all of that combined with feeling ashamed of having an abusive partner, compounded it.

What kinds of things am I having to do, or not do, to ensure I have access to material basics and support for my economic wellbeing?

I actually went overseas for two months while I was with him, and my intention was to break up with him and not return to that relationship. But when I got back I had nowhere else to go, all my stuff was there. And I didn't know if I had a job. It didn't seem feasible to return to my mum's house. It wasn't that that wasn't an actual option, but it didn't *feel* like an option, because I would have to own up to the relationship and then deal with my mum's fall out of whatever that would be. And my mum lives in a place that's pretty far away, and I didn't know how to drive, so I'd have to rely on public transport to get to work and all that sort of stuff, it seemed insurmountable. I needed to not move home, because if I moved home, I would be giving up all my freedom as I knew it, and that wasn't the purpose of breaking up with him. I couldn't go from one feeling of being trapped to another feeling of being trapped and isolated but in a different way, so that was hard.

So, I went back into that relationship for a couple of months before I got out again. And that was gross to know that you're compromising yourself, even though you know your path is out, but to have to live in that compromised position, that's awful.

PARTICIPATION

“My opportunity to participate, have a voice and be involved as a citizen, in the community and in my family, may be limited.”

What kinds of things am I having to do to enable my safe participation in society, community and family?

I kind of naturally withdrew from seeing my friends a lot because I was scared of the behaviour and I felt shame about it. So, while I'd say, I'm going to go with friends and that would be fine five days out from the event, but on the day he'd start with "what are you doing, why you going out, why do you need to see them?" Or "I don't want you to go, or I thought we were going to do this," making other plans for the same time without having discussed it with me. So he did all those kind of blocking things that then put you in a position to fight him to do something that you already knew was coming up and had committed to.

I didn't want to go through the hassle of him being grumpy with me because I was going out without him. I wasn't able to explain to people that there's a risk that I might cancel last minute because he may make it hard for me to go out. I didn't want to make him look bad, but then you look flimsy if you do. His dysfunctional behaviour is somehow seen as yours as you try to negotiate your way safely through but all people see on the outside is that you're the one not showing up. So you just don't commit or try to do those things in the first place.

You're anticipating an uncomfortable last-minute fight about it, so withdrawing is easier. Otherwise, you end up being blamed for their control or their abuse of you. Because to other people, all they see is you cancelling, they don't see the why.

Who knows about my circumstances, and supports my responses?

Our flatmate shared the property with us at the time. So, I ended up spending my time with him and socialising with him more because I could do that at home. I wasn't devoid of social engagement, but it was only with those people that were palatable to my boyfriend. We would socialise with my boyfriend's friends, some of whom I like, and still know. One remains a very good friend of mine.

But our flatmate at the time was a real character, so bless him for keeping me sane. He saw what was going on and was able to protect me in a way that was non-threatening to my boyfriend and didn't escalate his violence. I don't think anyone who isn't living in the house with you can truly understand what is going on, and even then they won't see all of it. I was lucky to have someone in my home who liked me as person, saw how I was being treated and didn't like it. It was good value spending time with him, and we ended up moving out together; the escape. He helped me plan to leave, and his parents assisted us getting a new lease. My mum was also key in helping me get out. When I finally felt I could tell her what was going on, and ask for help, she was there.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

“My body and mind suffer from the violence and coercion. I can become physically unwell, fearful, desperate, lonely, sad, and angry. Although my despair is one form of resistance to the violence, I may be seen as ‘clinically depressed’ or as having another disorder.

“My feelings are ethical emotional responses to violence.”

I developed an addiction to marijuana and used more drugs in that relationship as a coping mechanism, and also the social circles at the time. But definitely the dependency on marijuana was a coping mechanism.

Then I developed a severe eating disorder, where I simply couldn't hold down food. And I had to stop drinking coffee entirely because it would give me severe heart palpitations and I would fall over from the state of my heart, because I was so weakened that even a normal coffee was too much for my system to process.

My boyfriend was “supportive” in really dysfunctional ways. So when I couldn't physiologically hold down food and would vomit all the time, he would assist me in that vomiting. He would physically help my body not feel as much discomfort from the vomiting. It seemed supportive, but it blurs the lines of how safe you feel because I was being taken care of when I needed him, but he was abusive when I was independent. That dependency that felt good actually just reinforced an unhealthy reliance on him.

What kinds of things am I having to do, or not do, for my physical and mental health?

I would often be seeking medical intervention or having to go to hospital to have injections to stop vomiting. And I would vomit every half hour for eight to 12 hours, on some occasions. I think I knew it was my body's way of expressing that what was going on was really unhealthy and that this was my body's way of trying to get attention for help, I think. I ended up having a really restricted diet because I couldn't eat much that wouldn't start me vomiting, and then that would take such a huge toll on my body. I was too weakened to take care of myself.

Who understands I am not “ill” but suffering from violence?

I think because I was presenting in such a weakened state and severely dehydrated and all that sort of stuff, doctors never thought to ask me anything else. I was very susceptible to gastro bugs. So, it was often something like that that would trigger vomiting and then it would be relentless. So, it was always they were treating the virus, or the bug, or my presentation of symptoms, not asking any further questions.

I was aware, at some very deep level of consciousness, but I was ignoring that because that was too hard to confront. That would require me to take action, because once you see it, you can't unsee it. I just felt so trapped in that relationship. Trapped is the word. Trapped. And so, where would that realisation

get me, because I was still trapped? I didn't have the money or resources to leave by myself.

I'm sure my mum had those thoughts too. There's a whole lot of layers there with my mum as to our experiences of abuse and why that's a fraught issue for us to talk about openly. But I was always wanting to protect her from thinking that I was with an abusive partner. I would always present the best version of myself, even when she could see me physically deteriorating.

LEARNING

“Because I am forced to deal constantly with violence and abuse, and possibly with negative responses from others, I experience fatigue and isolation.

Sometimes I cannot help but ignore or avoid activities that could help me learn and develop as a person because of competing priorities related to violence.”

What kinds of things am I having to do, or not do, about my learning and personal growth?

I think part of my resistance to the relationship was continuing doing some things independently, so I always went to work. I enjoyed my job. And he was happy for me to have money because he was irresponsible with his, gambling and spending it drugs.

Sometimes he'd randomly turn up at my work. But it didn't feel like a gross 'stalkery' thing until after we separated. When we were together, it felt nice, like he was thinking of me and wanted to say 'hello' rather than he was checking on me. Obviously, the feeling of reassurance he liked me changed after we broke up and then it felt much more intimidating and scary to think he may just turn up at any time, embarrassing me at work or being angry.

LOVE AND CONNECTION

How am I remaining connected to others and to what I know is right? Even if only in the privacy of my heart and mind?

I managed to maintain my internal resistance and my messages to myself were, no, I'm not going to fulfil this abuse revictimization pathway (because I had experienced child sexual abuse), I'm going to get out. It was hard, I felt trapped, I felt overwhelmed, I didn't know what to do, but I knew I would get out, somehow. I just had that resolve, somewhere. I knew that. He didn't break me. Somewhere in me I could still see that his behaviour was wrong, not that I was bad.

SAFETY

“I don’t like what is going on. I am resisting and responding to the abuse, trying to manage it. I didn’t attract it, I don’t accept it, but I can’t stop it.

My safety is compromised, and I may be in danger of physical harm or being injured or killed.”

When he’d come home drunk and angry, and swearing, and being verbally abusive, that was scary. At those times, I’d just try to shrink myself, so I’d become a small target. So, whenever he’s yelling because I hadn’t made dinner, I’d just try and do that thing, so that it’s not the issue anymore; “well, I’m making dinner, I’ll finish making dinner, you just sit down, I’ll bring you dinner,” or whatever it is that they’re complaining about.

The times that he would come home having had a fight and he’d be bloodied from having been in a fight, that was scary too. I’d be his carer then, so I would patch him up. That was part of the long-term intimidation piece. It wasn’t scary like a direct threat to me in the moment but knowing that he had the propensity for that sort of violence, to headbutt someone with such force he smashed his own nose in, that stays with you.

I know that being safe is no simple, or single decision or task.

When we broke up, he continued to harass me. The flatmate and I moved out together and we moved into an apartment building that my flatmate’s parents lived in. So, that created an extra sense of safety.

But I had to avoid him and everywhere that he was. Where I worked was in the same suburbs where his parents lived, so there was always that level of anxiety that I might run into him. And because some of his friends became my friends, it was about making sure that I never accidentally saw each other at social things. I was very aware of that. I don’t think I ever quite vocally said, “if he’s there, I’m not coming.” But those friends wouldn’t have put me in that situation. They helped manage it as well.

I didn’t tell him where I lived, but he would turn up at my workplace and even for a couple of years afterwards he’d still call me.

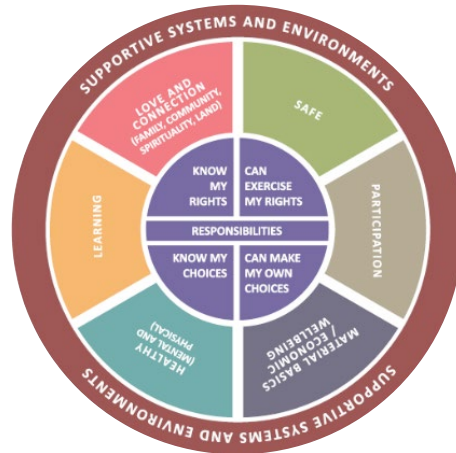
My wellbeing matters to me and this includes my safety.

Being ‘safe’ is more than being physically safe – it includes all aspects of my wellbeing.

Wellbeing includes being able to know and exercise my rights, and choices, and to be able make and act on my own decisions. Wellbeing includes being able to:

- Participate in my community
- Earn an income or access material support

- Maintain my physical and mental health
- Learn and grow as a person
- Connect with friends, family, community, country or faith; and
- Be safe: Physically, financially, emotionally, culturally, spiritually and psychologically.



Each area of my wellbeing will also change over time as my needs, priorities and circumstances change.

The violence I experience can undermine my wellbeing across many areas of my life.

Acknowledgement and thanks

Insight Exchange 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.

Handle with dignity

You have been reading carefully assembled excerpts of peoples lived experience of domestic and family violence. These are not simply another 'story', 'sample' or 'case study'.

Whilst consent has been obtained to share these accounts, we ask that as the custodian of these copies that you uphold the dignity of the people who shared them as you distribute and store them.

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- Keep the copies in an envelope distinct from paperwork and reports
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Disclaimer:

This My Safety Kit narrative is a carefully assembled excerpt of a person's lived experience of domestic and family violence. Details of this person's identity have been altered to protect their safety. Whilst great care has been taken to do no harm and to contribute to improved understanding of and responses to domestic and family violence, Insight Exchange assumes no responsibility for how the resource is used by other parties.

Further resources and support

My Safety Kit is an Insight Exchange resource for any person who at some point may be reflecting on their own relationships and experiences of domestic and family violence. The resource may also have benefits for people who are:

- Supporting friends and family who are (or might be) experiencing domestic and family violence
- Working as a service responder to people experiencing domestic and family violence

[My Safety Kit](http://www.insightexchange.net) includes contact details for services across Australian states and territories that may be able to support a person in their next steps. It is available online at www.insightexchange.net