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## **Gemma**

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\* THIS NARRATIVE INCLUDES DESCRIPTIONS OF DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ABUSE. \*

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.

## GEMMA

I've always had a sense of social justice and understood that domestic violence can happen to anyone. Now I've lived it, I know it to be true. Because of the nature of domestic violence during the ten-year relationship I worked hard to protect my partner's fragile ego. I was constantly propping him up. He thinks he's pretty special. He has a kind of arrogance around himself and his own sense of importance. He rates himself very highly.

I also didn't want other people to see what was really going on and how I was being treated. I didn't tell people about the lack of emotional intimacy in our relationship. It was difficult because I think from the outside it looked like the perfect scenario. We had the nice trips away and we had several properties, we were never lacking for anything financially when we were together. It was the insidious putdowns, the control, and the games.

### It was the insidious putdowns, the control and the games.

I used to say to myself; "this is normal, everyone has these ups and downs, and this is just a spat" or "he's just being a bit moody" or "things will improve". I was always imagining things would get better; "when I finish uni", "when we have a family", "when we get to the big house and he'll be happy." But there was always

something eating away inside, and I couldn't quite ever put my finger on it, but I knew it was wrong.

One time he made up a resume for me because I was trying to find work. He went to all the effort of making this resume and it looked really wonderful. When he presented it to me, I made a big fuss, "thanks so much, oh my gosh, that's wonderful". I was enthusiastic and said I would have just done this one little thing differently. Well, if he didn't hit the roof, "Right, you can do it yourself". He tore up the resume in front of me and threw it in the bin then deleted the file from his computer. He wouldn't let me have it because of one little thing that I'd commented on. But I managed to retrieve the resume from the computer's 'Recycle Bin' and used it without his knowledge. I had to do things like this to get around his constant games. I never knew where I stood.

One argument we had his level of hostility was so immense, it was frightening. The hatred behind those eyes in those moments of just pure outrage at the audacity of me for having a different opinion, was really startling. There was a huge disparity in what you would expect to be a reasonable response and what I often got. He was very hard to predict. He used his body language a lot, he knew all the tricks. Just the looks he would give and the tension in the jaw, and a very dismissive condescending eye roll. I saw it in the way he treated other people, even colleagues. He would just stare blankly when someone was just speaking normally. If he didn't like someone, he would have this really awful look. He would just stare you down. Very intimidating. He would also take issue with anything. If I ever disagreed with him, he wanted the evidence. He wanted me to be able to prove it. Where were the articles to prove it? What was I talking about, these things called emotions and feelings, what are they? That's just crazy talk.

We purchased a joint home. I was standing on a chair painting something and we were having some verbal disagreement. It escalated quite quickly. He ran at me, launching himself at me from quite a way across the room, and he pushed me off the chair. I fell awkwardly into a door frame. I caught my back on the door frame. I actually ended up with quite a sizeable bruise on my back as a result. But my reaction in that moment, was to fight, and so I got up swinging and was saying, “don’t you ever do that, don’t you ever touch me like that again”.

Even in that split second, I thought, “I need to watch this and if that ever happens again, I am so far out the door”. You know what, it never happened again. In hindsight, I guess he didn’t need to go physical to get what he wanted. He was smarter than that. I think he was a bit shell shocked by my reaction. He knew he’d crossed the line. I let things settle down for a few days and he wasn’t speaking to me again anyway. I thought, “no I need to show him what that actually did to me.”

So, I went and I lifted up my top and I showed him the bruise and I said, “this is what happened”. I made sure he knew what he did. I was too scared to say, “don’t do it again”, but it was very much implied. I did take photos of my bruise. I kept those photos for years, because I wanted a record, knowing that one day I might need that. It’s fascinating for me the way the relationship unfolded, and that those behaviours weren’t there at the start, and then they creep, and they creep, and they creep, and they become more apparent and there are bigger incidents.

There was another time when he took issue with a perceived indiscretion on my part and stopped speaking to me. I can only think it was because on the way to the airport to collect him I hung up on him as I was driving so shouldn’t have been speaking on the phone. When I asked what was wrong, he said I should know and should apologise. When I said I didn’t know, he refused to tell me, acted gruffly and refused to speak to me. I tried everything, being funny, concerned, serious. The not talking went on for three months.

At that time, I had a bit of a breakdown at work. He had said another acerbic comment to me that morning. I let the floodgates open and I couldn’t stop crying. A friend of mine at work had also recommended a psychologist to me, who I’d recently begun to see.

## What she didn’t pick up on was his power and control issues... That could have changed the whole trajectory.

My experience with the psychologist was both good and bad. What she didn’t pick up on was his power and control issues. I often think back, if that had been picked up earlier, I wonder if I would have gone back to that relationship. That could have changed the whole trajectory.

Around that time, I had taken some time out away from the relationship to reassess. I lived with mum and dad for a few months. My mum has been an amazing support. She was always ready to yank me out of that relationship at any point in time. I only needed to say the word. I felt very adamant that I wouldn’t be going back and this wasn’t the relationship for me. During this time, he wrote me a very nice note apologising for not seeing me or hearing me. He did a good enough job, so I bought back into the fantasy that things could improve. I made a plan that I wouldn’t agree to go back without couple’s counselling, as a minimum.

I moved back in and we went to couple’s counselling. The counsellor we saw was very well known and respected. She had one interview with each of us separately to discuss our answers to a confidential questionnaire she had given us. She then brought us together for our first session where she told us “oh, well, there’s really no reason here why you two can’t make this work”. I came out of that process feeling like she’d identified that it was a “communication issue” and that I “didn’t speak



up” enough and “he didn’t listen enough”. She certainly overlooked the seriousness of his behaviours and she led me to believe he could improve when he wouldn’t. She didn’t seem to notice that his use of control, the way he acted as though he were superior to everyone, how he enjoyed belittling myself and others. This psychologist seemed to miss that he wouldn’t show empathy and would minimise my feelings. I feel really let down here. I feel like she should have been getting me support to leave that relationship rather than trying to work on it. It’s difficult isn’t it, although I wanted to work on our relationship at the time, she really should have picked up on his abuse. Although it was in her financial interest that we continue coming to counselling.

We had been in couple’s counselling for only a little while and we hadn’t really addressed any major issues, and we went off on a short trip. Unbeknownst to us we get pregnant. We go back to our next session with the counsellor and he picks an argument with her and vows never to go back to counselling again. So, now I’m pregnant, we’re no longer in couple’s counselling and I’m back in the house.

The year my daughter, Erica, was born was one of our best years. We had rekindled something in that couple’s counselling. We had Erica to fuss over and bond over and that was a really special time. We also had our friends coming over all the time and we were showing off our beautiful girl and thinking how wonderful we were and how great things were, and then that kind of died off.

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My body and mind suffer from the violence and coercion. I can become physically unwell, fearful, desperate lonely, sad and angry. My feelings are ethical emotional responses to violence. *Follow My Lead*

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When Erica was 18 months old, we had an argument that escalated quite quickly. He was standing shouting at me how much he hated me, telling me that he wanted a divorce while blocking my exit from the bedroom. He was holding Erica in his arms, I pushed him backward so I could get away from him and the abuse; and go downstairs to de-escalate things between us. He made out like I had struck Erica; and told me he was going to report me to the Police and child services. He left to a hotel for the night taking Erica with him; but didn’t tell me where they were going. I called and reported it to the Police. I let them know he took Erica without my permission, so they made a report about that. I let them know that he threatened to make a false Police report however they would not put that in their report. They said there were two sides to every story and that they needed to speak with him. He returned with Erica the next day, apologetic and when the Police called to check-in I told them everything was okay.

When Erica was two years old, I returned to work part-time. Having been there a year or so, a lady from my work was picking up that I wasn’t very happy. We started chatting and she became my confidante, she helped me a great deal. I don’t know that I would have been able to leave that relationship if it wasn’t for her.

She really gave me the confidence to see what I knew was always there. She was the first person that when I told her what was going on, I felt really understood. She really listened and really heard what I was saying and got me talking about the particular behaviours. I began discussing, what was going on, and her advice was, “don’t change anything, just observe. Just observe where the control and the power lays in everyday interactions”. So that’s what I did for quite a few months.

**“...Just observe where the control and the power lays in everyday interactions.”**

We kept having discussions, and she said, “maybe it’s time to make a few little changes in your interactions”. She was the first person that said that his behaviour “sounds narcissistic”. It was very confronting when I read about narcissism because it described his behaviour so well. It validated the uneasy feeling in my gut that had been there for so long. It helped me to understand that he was perpetrating violence and abuse against me and that he would likely continue to hurt me and that his abuse could escalate. That’s when I knew that I needed to leave this relationship. That really was the wake-up call.

Shortly after that big realisation, I called off the relationship. He tried to win me back for a few weeks until I made it clear that that wasn’t going to be possible. And then the tables turned and very quickly it became the “okay, well, I’m going to prove you’re a bad parent” routine.

We separated but I continued to live in the house with him for another three months. This was not because I wanted to. I think I deserve a medal for lasting so long. Although I could have stayed with friends or relatives, there are complicating factors like getting Erica to and from day care. I was really trying to minimise the impact on Erica. I also had legal advice that if I moved out, I would be in a much weaker position to negotiate parenting and financial matters. And on top of everything, I was saving money for the lawyers knowing I’d need it as I was only working part time.

He made it really hard for me during this time. He refused to contribute to Erica’s day care costs. So, I had to pay for that. He also put a \$150 cap on the credit card, the credit card was in his name but I had a subsidiary card. We used to use it on everything. Then all of a sudden, he was asking me not to make joint purchases on it. I said, “But they are joint expenses, what do you want me to do?” I work part time, three days a week at a not-for-profit. He works full time as a medical specialist, so there’s a big discrepancy in our salaries. I earn about a third of what he earns. He made sure to tell me that he could raise the limit but I couldn’t and he proceeded to use it like he needed to. Then I’d go to buy groceries and it would get declined. So, I was using my savings for groceries and petrol.

When I was in the house with him, he would bait me into an argument and then tell me he’d recorded it. He told me he was documenting every “stupid” thing I do – it was a blatant threat. He captured our conversations on an audio recorder without my knowledge. He also kept a written record on his laptop. All the while, he was second-guessing me on every parenting decision; if I fed Erica too many grapes or if I let her change her jumper or god forbid, she should leave the house with a little bit of sleep in her eye. I said, “so you’re coming after me on parenting then?” And he nodded, nod, nod, nod, because he didn’t want his threats picked up on the audio recording.

**“You’re sick, you need help, you need a psychiatrist. You’re repugnant. Nobody cares about you.”**

**I knew very strongly that this wasn’t going to be amicable and that I had to do everything I could to protect myself and my daughter.**

I knew very strongly that this wasn’t going to be amicable and that I had to do everything I could to protect myself and my daughter. He should’ve been the one to get kicked out of the house, but he wasn’t. I was the one that was forced to leave because he made it so unbearable and toxic and unhealthy. He questioned my mental health: “You’re sick, you need help, you need a psychiatrist! You’re repugnant! Nobody cares about you. Nobody cares about you! I want you gone. I want you gone!”. It was really menacing. Our daughter was right there witnessing

all of this. He turned to her directly and told her directly, “mummy needs help.”

Later that week he came home and there were no “hellos”, just stony silence. Sitting there at the table he was just brooding and looking for the next thing that he could document. It was awkward and uncomfortable. I said, “did you want to do bedtime?”. He said, “no.” So, I just proceeded doing bedtime routine with Erica, brushing teeth, changing her nappy and then we were trying to get her PJs on. Erica wasn’t being particularly helpful with that by laying there kicking her legs in the air. Then he walks past the room, looking in very deliberately, to see what’s going on, and I challenged it. And I said, “can I help you with something”. He said, “I’m entitled to observe you”. And I said, “well, I’m entitled to observe you observing me” and it went from there. And this is playing out in front of her again. I said, “Erica, are we enjoying this? Do we like it when Daddy stares at us?” and she said “no”. I said, “no, I don’t either, how about we go to Grandma’s house?”. I said to him “let’s just take a few days, you know. We’ll come back. This is just a circuit breaker.” His response was, “if you leave with Erica, I’m calling the police”. I took that and ran with it. I went, “right, okay, well I’m calling the police too.”

So, I called the police, and I explained that we’re in a “high conflict separation” and that I just want to be able to leave the house safely with my daughter and I don’t want things to escalate any further, and can you send someone around please. And as soon as I’d made that call, he was very much, “oh, what are you talking about. Just stop and think about what you’re doing.”

He went and sat by himself over at the dining table with his laptop and was documenting everything, which gave me a chance to pack up. I spent ten minutes throwing a few things in a bag and then went out to the car.

I rang the police back to say, “look, I was able to leave safely, you don’t need to send anyone round”. But surprisingly, they said, “because it’s domestic violence and because you made the call, you need to stay there, and we need to send someone round.” I

still find it surprising that I had to stay in the vicinity of the perpetrator. I understand that the Police may have needed to sight us both and interview us both. But surely, they could have visited me at my parents’ house, or I could have gone to the station the next day or something. This seems to be a flaw in the process.

So, I had to stay there with my daughter in the car until the police got there. We’re sitting outside the house for quite a while. He was inside the house the whole time. I called my parents, so they came and sat with us until the police got there. I just thought, “thank god, I’m out of the house and at least we got to the car”. I knew then I could never go back and live with him again.

I’ve been separated for over a year now and there’s been more noticeable abuse happening now, than during the relationship, when it was well hidden. Things like not letting me in the house to get my personal belongings back; intimidating phone calls and threats; threatening the removal of the car; picking Erica up from day-care when it wasn’t his turn, threatening me through lawyers; not agreeing to go to the family dispute resolution people that I want to go to, you know, the standard affordable ones. Basically, just trying to make my life difficult.

My preference would have been to go somewhere free for family dispute resolution. I also wanted to come to some sort of agreement over a number of sessions, rather than being pressured to figure it out on one day. But he wanted to go to mediation that charged \$280 an hour. So, there’s financial pressure there as well.

**“Because it’s domestic violence and because you made the call, you need to stay there, and we need to send someone round now.”**

We had a mediation and all things were supposed to be on the table including finances. Of course, we get into the mediation and he had new financial information that made it impossible for anything to be resolved there. He was trying to get parenting sorted out in his favour before any financial decisions could be made. He was already threatening to file on parenting for custody. He threatened that if we didn't give him the four nights a fortnight to commence immediately, he would file an urgent application on parenting with the Court. So that's what this whole journey for me has been about; knowing that whatever parenting arrangements I give him, he is going to take me to court and try and get more.

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The person abusing me may change the nature of their behaviour rapidly, without warning, significantly changing the realities I face. *Follow My Lead*

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So, I have tried to be cautious on parenting arrangements not to my daughter's detriment, of course. It's just so that when we do get to court, we're not already at an arrangement where he's got her a lot as he was seeking ten nights a fortnight in his final orders. It was so frustrating. As the Court may have ordered a similar parenting arrangement to what we could have agreed ourselves in mediation. Instead, he chose to use the legal process to try to terrify me.

My legal advice was, "We have to let him go legal" and so, we went to family law court. Our one day of mediation was expensive because it was legally assisted, and pointless, because there was never going to be a resolution. I had to walk away from six and a half hours of mediation, which cost roughly \$10,000 in legal costs, and say, "let's not continue."

He did three things following the failed mediation. The first was picking up my daughter up from day-care when it was my turn to. My legal representatives wrote a letter saying, "please don't do that...we need you to sign an undertaking," which he ignored.

The following day he didn't leave the car at day-care which he was meant to do. So, I had to go and pick up the car because I needed to get her back to day-care the next day. He called the police and told them that if the car wasn't returned that night, that he'd be reporting it as stolen.

The third thing was he tried to renege on his offer of paying for my portion of the mediator's fees. So those were the three things. Eight days later his lawyers filed the urgent application on parenting with the Courts making out I was a risk to my daughter. Once you get involved in the legal system, it's very hard to negate all the misinformation he and his lawyers put forward because it's painstaking to go through every little thing they said and correct it. Whereas it's very easy for them to create the misinformation in the first place. He sought to increase his time with Erica through the Courts by making me out to be a risk to my daughter, and use the process to terrify me.

While we were awaiting a Court date his legal team sent a letter to say he will be increasing his care time of Erica from three nights a fortnight to six nights a fortnight with no consultation with or agreement from me. At which my point, my legal people said, "well, you can't let that happen, pick her up from day-care and don't give her back until he signs an undertaking." I followed the legal advice I received, he refused to make an undertaking. This resulted in him not seeing Erica for four and a half months.

Within that four and a half months Erica needed a health check. But he'd written me an email saying that he didn't consent to her going to any medical appointments. So, I sought advice from my lawyer, explaining that I'm the primary carer and my daughter needs to visit the Early Childhood Health

Clinic. On her advice, I did all the right things. I canvassed his availability, but he didn't get back to me. So, I told him the date and time of the appointment saying, "you're welcome to attend", but again he didn't get back to me. Then I got a phone call from the Childhood Clinic to let me know that he had tried to have the appointment cancelled.

I just thought he had just phoned up the Childhood Clinic, but he physically went in and asked to speak to the Manager. He argued with her to cancel the appointment. When he didn't get his way, he made a formal complaint about the Manager to the Medical Board. For the Childhood Clinic, this was a red-flag for them. They put me in touch with a social worker. I got a call from the social worker letting me know what had happened and she put me in touch with the domestic violence community support team at the hospital. Since then, I've been getting weekly phone counselling from the Domestic Violence community support service and that was helpful.

## I really understand why women fear for their lives when they are breaking free of a perpetrator.

I am having to go through this process and having to spend all this money in response to his abuse. I really understand why women fear for their lives when they are breaking free of a perpetrator. It is so frightening. I've only ever tested the water before so I don't know how this will end. I don't know how big his response is going to be. And I can only speak about it now because I've been out of it for a year.

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### 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.

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### Handle with dignity

You have been reading a 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. Tips for handling with dignity:

- Keep the copies in an envelope distinct from paperwork and reports
- Explain the importance and value of these accounts before distributing them
- Collect any copies left behind by delegates/participants after workshops



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### 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](http://www.insightexchange.net).

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Disclaimer: This Voices of Insight 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.

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