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Melissa

* 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.

MELISSA

My husband's biggest threat was, "I will take the children." That was the most terrible thing he could say to me. He never said, "I'm going to kill you." He knew I was a professional mother. I didn't work and I have two teenage children – they were my whole life. He started off saying things to me like, "if you talk to me like that," or, "if you do that in public," or whatever, "I will leave." Then it got to the point where I was like, "well just go," that was not even a threat anymore. Then it changed to, "if you do that, I will take the children and I will cut up the credit card and our son will not be going to this school, because you won't be able to afford to send him there. And you won't survive."

My mother left my father when I was three and my father stole my half-brother, changed his son's name, his date of birth, and said to my mother, "if you try to get him back, I will kill you." So, I grew up with the fact that there are bad men and men do take their children away. I'd seen it and experienced it. My husband, Mike, knew that as well. He knew that that threat was meaningful.

How you and I view things is personal and unique and can change over time.

Follow My Lead

When I met Mike, I thought he was a nice guy. I thought he was stable, he had a job and a house and he was very flattering to me. He always seemed gentle. I never thought he was violent. Through that early period, he spent a lot of money on me. He didn't have much of a social life, and I had lots of friends and did lots of things and he used to drive me around, because he had a car and I didn't drive. Those things were nice. If he'd said at the start that I was a "fucking c***," I wouldn't have gone out with him. But there were flattering things; it seemed like he thought he was lucky to be with me. It's not like I thought, "this person's an asshole, let's go and have a relationship and a couple of kids with them."

The biggest warning sign that I ignored, was how he lied to the girlfriend he had prior to me. She had a brother that had died. So Mike made up this story that he also had a brother that had died, so that he could get close to her and commiserate and be empathetic and talk together. So that was the biggest warning sign that he was a guy who was really good at lying; really good at manipulating. I don't even know why he shared that with me. Maybe he was testing to see what my reaction was. It stayed with me, but I didn't tell anyone else about it.

Before we had kids, we renovated the house and he threw an apple at my head. But it hit the wall, and it made a hole in the wall. So I just walked out. I could do that when there were no kids. I could

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just say, "I'm going." I had a strong network of people, so I could just go and stay at someone's house if I needed to. But then when people came over, there was this big hole in the wall and people

would comment, whenever anyone walked in. So, then there was a story, a lie; "oh yes, he accidentally

hit a hammer through the wall.” He had also thrown a bag of rubbish at my head that just burst and went all over the place. But I didn’t really think of that as a huge thing. I walked out both those times and he begged me to come back.

Then I got pregnant and he was quite involved with the whole pregnancy and came to birth classes and all that sort of stuff. I was feeling comfortable like, “I’ve met a great guy and I’m in a fantastic place and how lucky am I?” But even then, there was stuff that was controlling. Like he didn’t let me bring the shopping in from the car because I didn’t do it the right way. Stupid controlling things, like I would leave the pegs on the clothesline and he likes to take them in. But I did all the clothes washing, so I would always just say, “I’m doing it. If you want to do all the washing, you can look after the pegs your way.”

He used to say, “I like you because you’re feisty.” I was a strong woman, but then it was something that he complained about too. He’d say stuff like, “you disagreed with me in front of those people, I don’t like it when you disagree.” I was like, “what are you talking about? I don’t have to agree with you all the time.” I didn’t know they were warning signs either. Even the way I dressed. I used to have a really good figure and I used to wear nice clothes that were sometimes sexy, and he’d say, “I don’t know why you want to wear clothes like that and draw attention to yourself all the time.” I was like, “I’ve always dressed like this and I like dressing like this.”

“You disagreed with me in front of those people; I don’t like it when you disagree.”

Once I had my first child, our son, that was probably where it really started. He’d come home from work and I’d be like, “look what our Cooper’s done today,” and he’d be like, “don’t talk to me, I don’t want to hear about it.” He’d just go out the back and smoke and drink and stuff. I should have noticed then. But I didn’t think, “oh that’s terrible,” because I was really happy being a mum. I still did a lot of things with my friends. I still had a really strong group of friends.

It was when I was pregnant with my second child, our daughter, that he spat on me because I disagreed with him about something. The argument was about his family and he disagreed with what I said, and he spat on me. Then he stormed out and I was left to focus on calming my son down and letting him know he was safe, and everything was okay.

He wanted to have a second child, but then when I was pregnant, he was going on about how he’d be working for the rest of his life. I had a lot of complications, so he had to inject me twice a day in the stomach with some blood thinners. That meant that if he’d had too much to drink at night time it would really hurt, because he didn’t do it properly. Anyway, he was quite resentful through the pregnancy.

I used to have lots of people come over. Even when the kids were little, I still had people coming over. But he didn’t like that. So slowly I’d not be having my friends come over. He didn’t like my parents; my parents used to sometimes come and stay because they lived interstate. He’d always complain that he didn’t want them staying for periods of time.

Once we had an argument about his mother. I thought she’d been careless when she was looking after the kids and we argued about it. It was night time, and the kids were little and they were both still awake for some reason. It must have been about bed time. And he grabbed me by the back of the neck and pushed my head down and he was saying he wanted to punch me in the face. There was a knife in the kitchen. He didn’t touch it, but I thought he was going to pick the knife up. I was really scared.

I managed to get away, and get into the bathroom, and I locked myself in the bathroom. I had my phone on me, so I rang a friend who lived interstate and I explained what had happened. I knew she'd had a partner who was abusive, and he'd used her to marry him to immigrate, to get residency. Then as soon as they were married, he started beating her up. So I thought "she's had some sort of experience." That was just something I did intuitively, I didn't sit and think, "who am I going to ring?" But I wouldn't have rung my parents. There would have been a whole lot of other people I would have been ashamed to ring. Anyway, she had met Mike and thought he was really nice, and so on the phone she just said, "don't do anything." So, I didn't go to her again. She's actually ended up being someone who is quite upset that I haven't spoken to her about stuff. And I can't say, "but I did," because then she'd be even more distressed. I just can't do it. So, it's like, "just be a friend to me now," that's okay.

"Don't do anything."

Anyway, when I made that call, Mike was outside the bathroom saying, "who have you rung?" because he thought I'd rung the police. He was saying, "this will look really bad if you've rung the police, I'll look really bad." So I came out because I was worried about my kids, and he sounded like he'd calmed down. My three-year-old was hiding behind the door. I could hear him screaming, "don't call the police." He didn't want Daddy to go to jail. He was terrified. My daughter, Zoe, was in her bed reading. She couldn't read, but she was just looking at a book, shutting everything out. I didn't ring the police but I got my son calmed down. The kids were my number one priority in everything.

I put on the form what had happened. I didn't write 'assault' ... but I wrote what happened.

After that, we went to a counselling service for stopping family breakdown. When we got there, they had a form with a question about the reasons for coming, and I put on the form what had happened. He was like, "we don't need to put that." Even at that stage, I was like, "no, I want it in writing, because this is why we're here. We're here because of this." I didn't

write "assault," because I didn't have enough knowledge to know that that was enough to be counted as assault. I didn't have broken bones, I wasn't bleeding, I wasn't bruised. He didn't actually punch me. But I wrote what happened.

The counsellor did talk to me in the session and said, "a lot of women get killed in their homes by their partner. This is serious." But she never said go to the police or anything. She said, "there's seven stages of marriage breakdown, and you're in the last stage." That was when the kids were tiny, they were in kindy and pre-school but I didn't leave or take out a restraining order until the kids were in high school.

We just had that one session then. Mike said, "I'll do anything to keep the relationship together." But then he wouldn't go back to counselling, because he said we couldn't afford to it. The woman said, "I'm not here to take sides, I'm here to try and help you stay together." But she actually rang me twice as follow ups and left messages saying, "if you'd like to come in, even just by yourself." I didn't, because I couldn't pay. And because I don't drive, I was like, "how do I get there?" But mainly it was a financial concern. If I'd have said to her, "I can't pay," she probably would have said, "that's okay, it's a sliding scale." But I didn't know that then.

Mike set up himself up a room at the back of the house, as his room. First it had a television and a couch, then there was a bed in there. So then he just moved in. He separated himself from us. I did everything with the kids and I couldn't leave them with him, because he wasn't capable of looking after them. There were a few times I'd left my daughter in the room with Mike when she was learning to walk, at that cruising stage. Mike would be watching TV and I assume he didn't even look at my daughter, because I'd come back in from making a cup of tea and Zoe would have big lumps on

her head because she'd fallen and hit the skirting boards. Mike wouldn't even help pick her up. I'd come in and my daughter's lying on the ground with a lump on her head screaming and crying. Any normal person would pick them up and give them a hug, but he wouldn't.

Once, when my son was little, eighteen months or thereabouts, he was wearing a polar fleece zipper jacket and we were out shopping and my son had taken a lemon out of the protective string bag. And Mike grabbed my son by the back of the jacket and pulled him backwards so hard that the plastic zipper pulled into my son's throat and cut it, so it was bleeding. He was yelling at him for taking the lemon. And I'm like, "he's a kid. If you don't want him to touch it, just don't put him near it." He's going, "what about the people whose shop it is," and I'm going, "we're buying all this stuff, they don't care, they haven't said anything. Just give him something else." I was really calm in those early days. I didn't see the blood until we'd left the shop.

If Mike would ring up from work for some reason and I couldn't get to the phone because I was breastfeeding or changing nappies or something, he'd leave messages going like, "I know you're there, pick up the fucking phone."

The person using violence violates my rights, restricts my choices, and limits my capacity to act and put into force my own decisions. *Follow My Lead*

It was like me and the kids were in our own little world, the three of us. We were like a unit and he was outside the unit. When he did interact, I'd just be making sure I protected them. I compromised all the time. I compromised what I thought or what I wanted to say, to keep everyone safe and keep it as harmonious as possible. The house was always beautifully clean, I made amazing three course meals. I looked good, the house looked good. It might have been a bit messy, but it was clean. When he came home, I used to say, "here's Dad, Dad's here," so I used to try and include him nicely in everything as well.

When my daughter was little, she went through a stage where she just didn't even care. He would come home, and she'd not even notice, because he just wasn't part of our life. I used to say to my husband, when you come home, can you at least just smile at us, if you're not going to sit down and eat with us or sit down and talk, just smile at the kids when you walk past. So he'd do this big, fake smile. And one day we're going past a billboard of Hannibal Lecter with the mask on; a smile with just the teeth. And Cooper would point to that every day and go, "Daddy," because it has this mouth with the weird smile. So that should have also been a very big warning sign.

I did think about leaving, tried to leave, when the kids were in kindergarten and preschool. I went and spoke to a legal service specialising in families. The woman there said because I didn't have my name on the deeds to the house, even though we were married, I'd only be entitled to a tiny share of the value of the house. And because he'd done all the repair works and brought all the money in, I would only get a small percentage of that small share.

Then I was like, "God! I can't leave. Financially, I really am not going to be able to leave." Worse than that, she said, "because you'd likely be getting a share of the house, we can't help you, because we only help people that are in some other income bracket." So not only would I hardly get anything, they couldn't help me.

"Because you'd likely be getting a share of the house, we can't help you."

There was also a new law that had just come in where fathers had an immediate right to have 50/50 custody of the kids. And he always said he was going to take the kids if I left. At that stage, they were

so little, that completely terrified me. Even though he had nothing to do with the kids, I knew he would carry out his threat of taking them.

I went and spoke to four different lawyers on the phone, from different legal firms, and they all said the same; he would get 50/50. So that was the biggest thing; and they were so little. My parents came for a visit and I spoke to them. I didn't say what was happening, but I was saying I wanted to

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leave and telling them the situation with the legal system. They were going, "no, that doesn't sound right." They were saying, "the mother always gets the children." I'm going, "it's not

the 1970s, it's this new thing now." I didn't tell them how bad it was. If I had have told them what was going on they would have offered me financial help and things. But I didn't talk about it because I was so ashamed. I didn't want to [reach out], because it didn't go with the idea of who I thought I was. People used to describe me as being "a strong woman," so it didn't go with other people's view of me either.

Through that time, my son was experiencing a lot of anxiety. He's very sensitive, and he could feel all the tension in the house even when nothing was happening. His Dad never really liked him. So I went to this free counselling service. I was really lucky; the woman that I was first shown to, worked with a DV shelter as well. She recognised the patterns straightaway; the isolation and financial control. She used to say to me, "how does it feel being a single mother? Because what you're doing is bringing up your family by yourself and you're a single mother." She noticed a pattern that whenever my son had this huge mental emotional breakdown was when my husband was home. Which didn't happen a lot, because he used to go work, including on weekends and he had these outside hobbies with electronic toys.

Unfortunately, this counsellor couldn't continue what she was doing because of her family situation, and I got another person. The subsequent counsellors were saying, "oh he's not abusive, he just sounds like he's an unpleasant flatmate."

"Oh, he's not abusive, he just sounds like he's an unpleasant flatmate."

When Mike was at home, he was often absent. Even if we were watching a kid's movie in the lounge room, he'd be in his back room. Sometimes if I went into the kitchen, which was in-between, he'd be watching the same movie. I'd be like, "why don't you come and watch that with us?" Or there's a nature show, we watched lots of nature shows, and I'd say, "Why don't you come and talk to the kids about how you used to go diving with all the sea creatures? Even if you just come in and tell a quick story and then go out." He didn't want to have anything to do with us.

When we were having dinner, he used to always come out of his back room and tell us to be quiet. He was yelling, "it's like a circus in here, can you shut up, all of you shut up, I'm trying to watch TV."

And it's like, "I'm actually just calling them to come and help set the table. They haven't come so I'm calling again." I mean I'm in the middle of cooking and putting stuff on the table, I'm not running up and down the house, I'm going to call

"You can all just shut up, or I'll kick you all out on to the street, because this is my house."

out. He'd come in while we're at the table eating and talking loudly. He comes in and tell us all to shut up. He said, "you can all just shut up, or I'll kick you all out on to the street, because this is my house." He was always going on about how it's his house. He's like, "this is my house and if you guys

don't like it, you can call the police." At that point, I didn't say anything because the energy was really very aggressive and very scary. I think we all felt threatened.

There had been other stuff around this time whenever I wasn't in the room. Cooper would sometimes walk around making these really annoying noises. It was not like, "I'm just singing," it would be "poop, poop," or just like weird noises, it was weird behaviour and it would result in negative attention; particularly with Mike. Anyway, so Mike was trying to watch TV, and Cooper was doing these noises and wouldn't go away. And apparently Mike picked him up by the legs and hung him upside down, walked him through the house, holding him by his leg. I actually don't know what happened because I wasn't there. Cooper kept showing me this bruise on his leg and I was like "It's just a bruise mate. OK – don't worry about it." Then eventually it came out that this bruise was from his Dad's thumb and that Dad had carried him by his legs, upside down.

Another time my son was not wanting to shower at one point and my husband was dragging my son by the hair, naked, into the shower. I went in and was like, "what the hell's going on?" I remember feeling really bad because I've come in and said to Mike, "don't do that." but I didn't take my son and go. You know? We were still there. So I'm having all these turbulent emotions and thoughts, what sort of person am I that has let him do things to my kids, and I haven't done things.

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

At this point, I was in a terribly anxious state, trying to protect the kids, and it was like, everything's unravelling, and I was unravelling as well. I went to see a family counsellor about my anxiety and her first question to me when I first went there, they had a list of things, was, "is there domestic violence?" I said "no." I didn't want to sit there and say, "yes, my life is fucked" particularly with someone I'd just met. There's a lot of shame. And I was unsure; is it or is it not? It's a complex issue. But if I had said yes, I think she would have looked at everything with a different lens. It would be better if people asked different questions; not just "is there DV?" but "how do you feel? How are you physically; do you have trouble sleeping at night, do you feel nauseous?" It's not just physical either, people need to ask you about what the abuser is saying and doing, because it's a whole pattern of behaviour - there was a lot of gaslighting and I really began to doubt myself. DV's not just a one-off, tick a box assessment. They don't look at the whole picture.

"Is there domestic violence?"

Initially, I didn't know the verbal, psychological abuse and financial abuse was even considered domestic violence. That's not put out there in society and I don't think it's seen as being valid. It's not considered valid evidence because there are no physical wounds.

I'd also gone to my doctor and said that I felt sad. They thought I might be mildly depressed or something, so I went and saw a therapist on that mental health scheme, and when I was talking to

I actually had a plan in the back of my head; I'm going to leave and I'm getting myself financially independent.

her about stuff, I ended up shaking, my whole body was shaking, and I needed to go to the toilet and I just had really bad diarrhoea and my whole body was shaking. Just telling someone about everything and having it validated, by someone who was a professional and saying, "yes" was so powerful. But she

was also saying, "if you tell anyone these things that he's doing, surely you will get the kids." But then when I spoke to a legal person, they were like "no, it has to be really provable abuse. It has to be medical reports." Physical abuse. "Have you done all these things?" And I was like, "no." So it was

like well, “he’ll end up with the kids.” It didn’t seem like there was a way out of it. And then I start thinking, “what sort of person am I, what sort of mother am I to have my kids in this situation?”

As the kids went through school, I actually had a plan in the back of my head; I’m going to leave and I’m getting myself financially independent. I did a lot of volunteer work and I started doing afterschool classes, a couple of afternoons after school. So I was getting a small income, but I was really good at what I did, and it was starting to build as a business I had really great responses and feedback from people. People were saying, “when your son goes to high school next year are you still going to be doing your classes?” I also got my driver’s licence, so I could drive. So my independence was starting to become more real. I was starting to feel good about myself and feel like I was myself again.

I’d also managed in that period, after seeing the solicitors, I went and got my name on the house deeds. My Dad had helped with some of the building work and I’d put in a lot of effort and I said to Mike, “I think part of our problem is you still have all the financial control and power. I think it will be better for the relationship if I’m on the deeds.” He eventually agreed to that.

The person committing the abuse may isolate me from those I love and manipulate others against me, and undermine my relationships including my parenting. *Follow My Lead*

As the kids were getting bigger, I had a conversation with him in the kitchen and I remember him saying, “those kids would listen to you and believe anything that you told them.” And from then on, he made a concerted effort to undermine me. He started working first on my daughter. He would say stuff like, “she can’t organise anything,” even though I was highly organised. Just put downs and taking her into the back room, into his room, and talking about me. Also building this special relationship with her. He just completely undermined me as a parent.

Then he started working on building a bit of a relationship with my son. I was encouraging that, thinking this is really great. Everything I’d read, that a kid’s father, even if they’re a bad father, is actually an important thing to have in your life. So I did all this stuff to encourage that, and it was the worst thing I could have done.

As my daughter was getting older, Mike had been saying to me, “sometimes I see girls in the street and I think, they look good and I realise they’re only like 14 or something.” It was a bit weird. Then he was touching my daughter on the bum and I was saying, “that’s actually inappropriate.” He never even patted her on the bum when she was a baby, which would be a normal thing, “why are you doing it now that she’s a teenager and she’s starting to develop, it’s inappropriate.” He responded by throwing a bottle at my head. He also smashed a glass window, that was safety glass, at head level with another beer bottle.

I had a conversation with another therapist I was seeing, but she kept saying, “I don’t think it’s domestic violence,” despite the fact he was throwing bottles at my head. That really disturbed me. I went to the police after the bottle was thrown. I didn’t go straight away. I went a week or two weeks later. At this point, I had spoken to someone else who was another mother at the

school who worked at the hospital as a counsellor. I sort of vaguely told her a bit about what was going on, and she was like, “you need to see someone,” and she was saying, “you need to get angry as well, so that you can leave and that you can take the steps you need to get help.” I rang Legal Aid and they were actually the ones who said, “go to the police and go now, because the longer you leave it, the worse it is.” Anyway, I went to the police. I had a good female officer who took

“I don’t think it’s domestic violence.”

everything down, and then she made a video statement. So I actually had a video statement. At that point I was still shaking and I felt like I was going to vomit all the time.

They said, “look, we can tick a box for no contact with the kids,” and I was like, “well, I think the kids will need to see their father; they’re going to want to see him.” I said, “what I want is for him not to be in the house.” She went off and saw her supervisor, and whoever the supervising officer was on that night said, “we can’t do that because he owns the house.” Apparently, you can’t evict someone that owns the house, you can only do that if it’s a rental property, and he’s entitled to live there.

They said, “we’ll put a protection order in place, we’ll be coming around tonight at six o’clock.” But they didn’t come around at six o’clock. It took them about two weeks to actually come around. So I had this whole fortnight where they kept saying they were going to come round and then they didn’t. I’d be thinking, “I hope it’s not while the kids are up.”

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

I told two friends that I’d gone and taken out a restraining order and they went “oh, I wouldn’t have done that. That’s a really serious thing.” So then I tried to take the order away and the police were saying, “no, actually you can’t do that and it’s a really serious thing, unless you’re lying.” I was like, “no, I’m definitely not lying.”

“I wouldn’t have done that. That’s a really serious thing.”

Then the police said they were definitely coming that night, so I went and stayed at a friend’s house because I didn’t want to be there, because I knew he’d be really angry and abusive. I’d organised for both the kids to have sleepovers at other people’s houses. At this point all his behaviour was escalating, and he was very verbally violent as well.

He rang me that night going, “where are the kids, where are you, nobody’s at home.” And so I rang him back and said “look, the kids are fine, they’re staying the night at other people’s houses.” I said, “I’ve just done what I’ve done to protect myself.” Then he was going, “what have you done?” I just hung up and turned the phone off. Then he kept leaving all these messages going, “it’s really irresponsible, I don’t know where you are and I’m really worried about the kids.” The one thing I would never have done is anything to endanger my children.

When the police did eventually come to serve the protection order, it ended up being in the day time. I got a phone call from the police saying, “he’s not answering the door, you’re going to have to come here and open the door with the key.” So I had to drive back and just as I got there, he’d come out. They were putting him into the van. He was handcuffed, and it was like a big paddy van. He turned around and looked me straight in the eye. So it looked like I’d driven back to see it happen or gloat or whatever it was. So that was also really bad. They charged him with intimidation and harassment because I wasn’t actually hit with anything. Then I was thinking, “I’m better off being hit with the fucking bottle.”

I was thinking, “I’m better off being hit with the fucking bottle.”

The police put him back in the house and because I didn’t want to be back in the house with him I went to Newcastle for two weeks. I had to come back, because I had to go to court to try and get him out of the house.

The domestic violence (DV) officer said to me, “the judge wants to see that you’re actually here. You don’t have to do or say anything, just come in so that she can see that you’re here and you’ve put forward this amendment thing that you want.” So I went to the courtroom, and then the judge said, “come and stand at the front here.” She said, “why were you not here two weeks ago at this thing?” I said, “I went to Newcastle for my safety.” She said, “this court’s very busy don’t you know, we can’t have people wasting time.” She read this thing out, she read all the legal stuff and she said, “do you understand that, do you know what all of that means?” I had to say “no, I don’t understand all that legal language.” So she turns to Mike and goes, “Mike, nobody wants you in the house. They just don’t want you there.” But she told me to go and stop wasting the court’s time and said that me and the DV officer and Mike and his solicitor were to go and come up with a solution to this problem. But she couldn’t just kick him out of the house, because I should have been there two weeks ago.

“This court’s very busy don’t you know, we can’t have people wasting time.”

We eventually made an agreement where he’d live in the back of the house, but he wouldn’t come in through the front door. He’d come around the side of the house and we’d put a lock on the back so he can come in the back. He had his own back entrance, he couldn’t come through past the lounge room or to the kids’ bedrooms or my bedroom. But it meant we had a shared space, which was the kitchen, dining area and the bathroom, which were next to his bedroom, and the back yard. I was thinking, they’re all the areas where I’ve had him do things to me. It’s all the areas where there’s tools lying around. There’s hammers and drills and lumps of bricks. There are weapons, these are all the areas where there’s weapons. It’s all tiles as well, so it’s really hard and if you get thrown to the floor on that, you get hurt.

My relationship status with the person abusing me creates different levels of risk, threat and consequences for my dignity and wellbeing. *Follow My Lead*

With Mike back in the house, he upped the ante and became quite aggressive towards me, calling me a c*** and a bitch and stuff in front of the kids. The kids, basically from the time he moved back into the house, the kids became really disturbed. He’d bribe them with lollies and money and told them all these stories. The kids were starting to be manipulated by him. He’s a really good manipulator. He said to me, “I am going to get a protection order out on you the way you did on me.” He also said, “you don’t have a chance because you’re not in a financial position to do anything.” “You won’t be able to look after the kids. I’m much better off than you. But you’ve got an advantage because you got a protection order out against me.” He said to me, “I’ve already got Zoe on my side, and now all I have to do is get Cooper.”

The court made him go to men’s behaviour therapy group. That’s where his behaviour got worse. I spoke to the head of the program there, because they didn’t contact me, which they were supposed to have done to make sure that I was getting support. They said, “we don’t check to see if it has had an effect or worked, we just tick that they’ve attended.” So even the program itself, the people running it are saying, they’re not measuring whether or not it’s working. He didn’t have a problem with anger management, he had a problem with violence towards me and his children and power.

The children started not going to school, they started doing very poorly at school, not attending, not handing things in. They became violent towards each other and me. He was telling the kids if I take the computer off them, it’s “theft”. So they’re all on their computers all the time and not doing anything that they should normally be doing. They’re not going to school, and he’s encouraging that by giving them a key to his back room. It’s full of lollies and Xbox and TV and fridge, everything they could want.

He was saying stuff to me like, “nobody thinks you’re a good mother anyway; all your friends and your family.” I was in such a bad headspace then, I knocked on his door at like, three o’clock in the morning going, “who said I wasn’t a good mother?” He’s going, “I’m not talking to you, go away, I feel threatened.”

“I’m going to make this last as long as it can. I’m going to make you have a nervous breakdown.”

I’d initially been asking, let’s just settle. I just want to sell the house or be given my share of the house and separate, go our separate ways. But he said to me, “I’m going to make this last as long as it can. I’m going to make you have a nervous breakdown.” He was encouraging the kids when the kids started attacking me. He saw me with bruises from the kids, and he rang the police and said, “she’s making stuff up and she’s going to say that I’ve done these bruises.” Anyway, the police turned up, and he’s saying, “I’m in fear for my safety. She’s been in my room at three o’clock in the morning,” and blah blah blah. By the time the police arrived I was shaking, because I was like, “I can’t believe this.” Number one, that my kids were attacking me, and number two, that he hasn’t tried to help settle the kids, who are obviously seriously mentally disturbed.

Another time he’d tried to push his way through the front door, which he’s not allowed to do. So I’ve rung the police and said, “he’s threatening me and I’m really scared.” The police came around and said, “he’s got a very different story to

“Look, he’s a very intelligent man ... he would never break his protection order.”

you and he’s saying that you slammed the door in his face.” I said to the DV officer when she got here, I said, “if I was slamming the door in his face, where would he be standing, for me to have slammed it in his face? He’d have to be at

the front door, on the step.” The police said to me, “look, he’s a very intelligent man, he’s told us, he would never break his protection order, that would be breaking the law” I was like, “number one, he’s not intelligent, he’s a fucking moron, but number two, intelligent people do bad things. Just because you might have a high IQ doesn’t mean you aren’t aggressive.” Intelligent people kill their partners. I said, “he might seem mild when he’s out there, but that’s what he does in court as well, that’s not what he’s like when you’re not here.” The woman said, “oh what, as if when you went to court, you wouldn’t be wearing your best dress.” And you know, “he wouldn’t hurt anyone.” These are the police, the female officers!

I may receive both positive and negative social responses from others. The quality of the social responses I received influences ‘if’ and ‘how’ I engage with social networks and services. *Follow My Lead*

Even before it had got to this point I’d had DV officers say thing to me like “You can’t just come in here saying things like that, we need proof.” One time this officer who was aware of my situation she told me “I can’t talk to you at the moment, because I’m giving a talk tomorrow and I need to go and prepare it. But come back when you’ve got some more evidence.” Then I had another DV officer saying, “why do you want him out of the house anyway?” I just said to him, “I don’t want to wait until I actually get hit with the bottle in the head.”

Some officers really tried to get a handle on what was happening but it was always so complicated. One of the officers took the kids out the back and spoke to them individually and said, “what’s going on?” He came back in and said, “the kids want to stay with their Mum and with their Dad, they want 50/50, and they say that Mum gives as good as she gets.” This is because

The kids had to blame someone, and I was the safest person.

he was saying I’d pushed him. The kids were just backing up everything he said, I have no idea why. The kids had to blame someone, and I was the safest person. Apparently, I’ve been told that often it’s the person that they have the most attachment to, that they are going to act out with the most.

After that Mike started telling them that “Mum won’t be able to look after you, she hasn’t got any money, she hasn’t got a job.” He started buying them huge gifts. He set the whole thing up. My daughter would be assaulting me, pulling my hair or doing stuff, and he’s just standing there laughing and encouraging it all.

The day my daughter tried to set me on fire, I rang the mental health line. I listed all the things she’d done. And said, “I’m seriously worried for her mental health, I think she’s depressed and very

“I’m not getting off this phone until you put me through to some service that can actually help.”

confused.” They said, well “it doesn’t sound like she’s confused, it sounds like she’s just angry and malicious and doesn’t have mental health problems.” I just said, “I’m not getting off this phone until you put me through

to some service that can actually help.” Eventually I got put through to this other service for adolescent health. I had a mental health nurse that came once a week or once a fortnight or whatever. She started coming, and she’d come in just for ten minutes to talk to the kids and build up a slight rapport so she could refer us on to someone else.

She also rang community services for me and was trying to get something happening there. So I’d check in with her. I said, “I need help and I need help getting them to school.” I needed people to see what they’re like in the morning, because I’m there going, “let’s go to school,” and I’m getting hit. She was helpful, and she was very supportive. She’d say “yes, so they’ve seen their Dad again, and now they’ve done this.” She was reiterating that there’s a pattern.

This is all happening in that first year of that protection order. It must be in a period of nine months. It was really horrific. I tried to get mental health help for both the kids. I had a lot of problems with my son’s school. I went asking for help and the counsellor was saying, “oh he didn’t seem to be very engaged in the counselling he had with us.” And I said, “but he actually came home and told me that he’d been to the counselling with you, and he couldn’t remember what your name was, but it started with a D and he really liked it.” She said, “oh well he didn’t open up.” I’m like “well, it might take him a couple of weeks. He’s not probably going to do that in his first session.” Anyway, she just said, “I haven’t got time, he can self refer.” That’s the thing, once they become adolescents, you can’t force them to do counselling, they have to ‘self refer’. I said, “what are the statistics?” They were saying, “there’s 2,500 kids in this school, we can’t be there for each of them.” I went “well, I’m sure out of the 2,500 kids not each one of them needs help.” I said, “I actually asked you to help when he first started skipping school and you told me that you couldn’t help him.”

I was continuing to seek out and try new things.

I was continuing to seek out and try new things. I would do whatever it takes but I kept getting mixed results along the way because the experts are working with an overly simplistic framework. It’s not

open to the complexity of the issues. It's a very complex issue. You cannot put it down to a couple of questions.

Anyway, I got the kids into a specialist youth psychiatric unit to get assessed. And this woman came and started listening. She sent the kids out and looked at the dynamics and went like, "they're not listening to anything you say. It doesn't matter what you say, they'll just do the opposite, it doesn't matter what it is." She said, "I can see what's going on here." She was saying "they see their relationship with you and their Dad as equal and it's all fair, but I can see from you, where this is going." She said, "men use the courts and you're going to get put through the court system. You need to protect yourself, you need to get a lawyer, because that's going to be the next thing that's happening." I went and saw my doctor, because at that point I was very stressed. Everything was just unravelling and falling apart and it was like, "I don't know who these kids are. But they're not acting like my kids." Nothing was working.

Because of what was happening, I had to start driving more. I used to only drive five kilometres around my house but I had to start going further afield. When Mike heard that, that's when he started blocking my path. It was like the more independent I got, it was more of a worry to him. Also, my parents were paying my legal costs and he didn't think that they would step in and do that. It was as if he thought, "oh, this is not working how I thought it was going to."

He kept going to the police and saying that I'd had a mental breakdown. Sometimes police would come to the house and say,

"you're wasting our time and police time is precious." One officer said to me, "if I was you, I'd be going and living in my car with

"If I was you, I'd be going and living in my car with those kids."

those kids, this house doesn't have a good feeling." It was the middle of winter, and she didn't even know if I had a bloody car. I might not have had a car. She just said, "I wouldn't be living here." I said, "I've actually tried," I said, "I've been asking from the very start to have the house settled. I don't want to live in the damn house, I just want my share of it, so I can go and move on with my kids. I can't live in a car with kids." Then I had other police who were really lovely and ringing back the next week checking that I was okay.

I think I was seeing three counsellors at that stage because I was really concerned for the kids. The psychiatrist said, "Usually we'd say, just see one person but at the moment for someone like you, in your situation, that's okay, you're getting different things from the different counsellors." The advice from the family health person, was "just ignore the behaviour." That was the so-called scientifically proven thing; that if

"Just ignore the behaviour."

you just ignore them, they'll stop it. However, that was the worst thing I could have done; it just escalated. I also had the mental health nurse that occasionally came to the house, she said, "look, you need to stop making meals and stuff, if they're not at school," because they were going to school one day a week. She said, "don't do stuff for them. If they're not doing what they're meant to be doing, make sure there's food, but let them look after themselves. Those are the things you do when they're behaving as they should be."

And they were doing all these special things with their Dad, like going to the movies or having lunch. He'd be seeing them at school, giving them pizza money, stuff that he'd never done before. So, it was like constant bribery. Spending thousands of dollars for them for their birthday; saying to me you know, "you only ever bought them second hand things," which was all I could afford.

I might be in relationships with more than one person who is committing violence against me. *Follow My Lead*

When my daughter was spray painting the walls inside the house, I heard her on the phone to Mike, walking around telling him that she'd done it. So, there was just shit everywhere. If I'd made rice, the kids would get the leftover rice and throw it all over the place and squash it in-between the floorboards or onto the carpet. They would pour sauces behind cupboards and under things and tip nail polish onto the floor; stuff that was really hard to clean up. Then when I stopped cooking the meals, they'd get up in the middle of night and cook cakes and stuff, pull every drawer out, throw shit all over the floor, drip cake dripping down these wire cupboards that were like mesh. Zoe spray painted the fridge and the stainless steel. The writing was on all the mirrors in the bathroom and all the glass windows. So it was like a horror movie; sticky notes written in lipstick, saying "I'll be back."

It got to the point where we had this terrible weekend. My son had gone to a birthday party and I came back and said to Zoe, "it's 11 o'clock, let's go and have lunch - we've got four hours while Cooper's at his birthday party." She was in bed and I said, "you need to get up." She came and lunged at me and just gouged my face. So, I left and went to her friend's house, one of the friends who'd been helpful. And her friend opened the door, and I was just standing there with gouge marks and tears running down my face. I said, "is your Mum home?" And she just got her Mum, and as soon as her Mum saw me she just went, "Zoe's done that." She made me a big cup of herbal tea and brought me some chocolate, everyone else knew who I was as a person and what a great mother I was. I had to go pick Cooper up from the birthday party with my hair over my face because you could see these bloody gouges.

When we got home, Zoe got worse. Then I lost it as well. I ended up saying some really horrible things on that weekend. It was like, I just can't cope with this anymore. I'd been really proud of myself that I had managed to cope without retaliating at all with the kids. But I was reaching a point where I just could not cope.

All the stuff I'd been told to do wasn't working. All the stuff I'd instinctively done as a mother, which has always worked for me, none of that worked. I'd already asked community services for help and they were like "oh, we've tried, but it's too busy, nobody can help you." It was like, you know what, if they had have come in and helped me when I first asked for help two months ago, I wouldn't have got to that point.

"It's too busy, nobody can help you."

I smashed some plates in the kitchen, because I just needed to get rid of some of this anger, and I was yelling, I did a lot of yelling. Zoe pulled me down to the ground by the hair and it was near a glass kitchen cabinet. I thought she was going to smash my head into the glass cupboards. I was so scared, I actually wet my pants. I was yelling out to Cooper to ring the police, ring the police. I was screaming in pain, and she didn't stop. She was dragging me around the floor, and she was saying, "apologise, apologise, say you're sorry." She was calling me a c*** and stuff like that. At that point I just went, "the only c*** in this house is you." So, I actually said stuff that was really disgusting as well. I went to leave but I just sat in the car; I couldn't actually drive because I was in no state to drive. Cooper came and sat in the car for a bit. So, I think there was a point there where he was trying to hold on to the relationship with me.

In the end, I drove away. I went to a friend's house. I just said, "I can't go back there." I called and spoke to Cooper and said, "I'm going to have to get your Dad to come and pick you guys up, I can't do this at the moment." I said, "do you want me to ring him or would you like to ring him yourself?" Cooper said, "I'll just ring him." So I left it at that. I didn't really want to ring him and say, "you need

to pick the kids up because I can't cope and the house has got shit all over the place." Anyway, the kids went with him. Mike took them to the police, of course. They made statements. Then I ended up with community services, they were saying that I was talking inappropriately to my children and about my children.

I didn't [go to the police] because I was scared to go - because I thought I might get in trouble.

My DV counsellor was saying, "you should go to the police. I want you to show them your body." Because I had bruises from where Zoe had beaten me with a metal pole from a mop or a broom. She said, "I want you to go and I want them to take photographs of your body." I didn't, because I was scared to go, because I thought I might get in trouble.

My case worker from community services said you need to come in to have an appointment with me and a supervisor from this other program that we can get you into, this family functional therapy. I was like, "yes, anything's great." Anyway, I went in there, and they all said, "so what happened?" I went through everything that happened on this weekend - and this is what I did that was really bad. They kept saying, "oh thank you for being so honest." Throughout all my dealings with community services, I was thanked all the time for being honest. Then they used it all against me, because Mike was going in there and lying.

The child protection workers didn't look at domestic violence. They saw that as separate, even though there's all these studies around the world that show it influences children's behaviour, and in my case, it was very clear. Anyone could see that there was this very large change in my children's behaviour and it all fitted the things they say children do in response to domestic violence; they can stop doing well academically, they can become violent, they can become upset and depressed and self-harm. The sudden shift in their behaviour was recognised by the police, by the schools. It wasn't just me. But that wasn't counted at all.

They said that I had to sit in the room with Mike and the kids, even though there's DV. And then because I didn't agree to sit in the room with them, I was excluded from that program. It meant I couldn't communicate with my kids; I couldn't send them a letter, I couldn't phone them, I couldn't talk to the woman who ran it. But I still wanted the kids to go through it, because at least they'd be getting some help. But I said to them, the longer they're with him, the less likely they are to talk to me, because he's feeding them lies. They said "you'll have to see him at some stage you know. When the kids have children," and I said, "actually no I don't. If that ever happens, that's 20 years away." Then community services couldn't facilitate me to have a visit with the kids. I said "I don't want to see them by myself, I actually want someone there for my own safety," and they wouldn't facilitate it. They said the kids were with Mike as a "family decision." If it has been a forced removal, then they could put me in some supervised contact. Anyway, it meant I had no contact with the kids.

The first meeting I had with her and her supervisor, after the kids had been with Mike for a month, I said, "he won't let them go to the counselling," and they're saying "look, he's very protective of the children, he doesn't want them seeing any sort of counsellor unless he's in the room." "Yes," I said, "that's not protective." They went "look, Melissa, a lot of the fathers that come to community services don't want that." I was going, "well doesn't that tell you something? If you can't see that that's controlling!" They were saying I was being unreasonable, I was in tears. And her supervisor says, "how could you see your children at the

"How could you see your children at the moment? You're emotionally unstable."

moment? You're emotionally unstable." She kept saying to me "he's the biological father, he's the biological father," like five times. I was thinking, "so fucking what?" Anyway, I was excluded. And they were surprised that I was upset that the kids didn't want to see me.

Until you are in those systems you don't realise how they work and I actually think a big part of the problem with a lot of services and the laws, rules and guidelines is this focus on the "evidence base" which discriminates against women because generally it's the women who are busy looking after the kids, and they're doing the caring role and struggling with their mental wellbeing and health. You're not in a position to be gathering evidence. The way the systems work with evidence often puts the men in further positions of power. Even when a woman can get in front of the courts, you know when the protection order says the perpetrator is not behaving in accordance with normal acceptable types of behaviour, they send them off to do courses that have nothing to do with power and control. They send them to anger management, so they get off from having to take responsibility for their actions directly. That's the thing that really bothers me with the system.

I mean, I am articulate and a lot of times when I presented to services, I probably didn't even look like there was anything wrong because I was holding everything together. But then at the point where I did fall apart with child protection, that was the worst thing because they saw that emotion as me being uncontrollable and hysterical, that sort of 1950s hysterical woman. But the loss; not having my kids and having them choose not to see me, it was completely devastating, absolutely devastating. There's this idea that how you feel is not real, it's just a feeling. I even had neighbours saying to me that there is something wrong with me that I'm feeling like that and thinking like that.

Now, Mike keeps trying to say I should be working and paying maintenance. I'm nearly 50, I haven't been in the workforce proper for the past 20 years, finding a job's not particularly easy. He doesn't

There's this idea that how you feel is not real, it's just a feeling. I even had neighbours saying to me that there is something wrong with me that I'm feeling like that and thinking like that.

count the fact I've been paying the kids school fees by borrowing money off my parents. He doesn't count that, "but that's your parents." And it's like "yes, it's on my behalf and I'm going to have to fucking pay it back."

I still don't have my children. And I still haven't got any money or payout. I won't ever have enough to financially be in a position to have

my kids living with me. He never said, "I'm going to kill you," he said, "I'll take your children," and that's what he did. It's the worst thing he could have done to me.

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

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- 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

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](https://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.

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