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Sam

* 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.

SAM

My mum and dad split up when I was about 18 months old, and I was living with my mum, my auntie and my cousin. My mum was pursued by a new man, quite persistently. I remember him being part of our lives from that point. He did all the nice things, picked her up from work, dropped her off to work, flowers; very romantic. Growing up, she always talked about "the charm syndrome," and he was all of those things.

We moved in with him. Mum was working as a musician at night, and to save up for a trip to Europe she worked as a cleaner in the daytime for a while, and she would do casual teaching as well. She was out of the house at night a lot and sometimes in the day, and he was effectively my babysitter. He'd already started 'grooming' me by then.

One of the scariest memories I have is of being in his truck, and my mum having to go back into the house for some reason, and we were waiting for her. He turned to me and said, "why don't we just run away together, we'll leave her here, it'll just be me and you. I love you." And I remember being intensely petrified in that moment.

I am constantly self-assessing my safety and watching for changes in risk.

Follow My Lead

I don't have a lot of strong memories of the abuse itself, I have a couple of flashes of memories. I remember my bedroom was attached to my mum and the perpetrator's room, it was like a sunroom. So yes, easy access there. One particular incident I remember in the lounge room and him grabbing the old-fashioned dialling telephone, and saying to me, "don't you think of calling anyone." And I must have been about four, so I don't know if I could, I don't recall being able to use the phone. But he put the phone up on the mantelpiece out of my reach. My mum had been in the shower, and when she got out of the shower, he stormed from the living room into the hallway, where I could see, and he grabbed her around the throat, and was strangling her up against the wall. I don't know what for or why. He then threw her on the ground in the hallway with the towel dishevelled.

I had been telling her that monsters come into my room at night.

We lived with him for a while, but Mum grew suspicious of him when she found him one day in the bath with me and my cousin, who was two years younger than me. I was four years old. She knew that wasn't right. I had been telling her that monsters come

into my room at night, and she'd found, I don't know if it was blood or discharge, in my underwear. That made her take me to have a medical inspection.

The first female doctor we saw was very dismissive and ready to just explain it away. She said, "oh you know kids, they insert things themselves all the time, like girls are always exploring their vaginas." I don't know if that's true, that upset and discouraged my mum, but she persevered.

We got an appointment at the Children's Hospital. We went in and we were waiting to see the doctors. In the waiting room, I could tell my mum was anxious and scared. She explained to me why we are here and what was going on. We had spoken about what the doctor was doing and how I felt about it. So mum spelt all that out and gave me options the whole time. She always gave me choices and agency in that, so I knew what was going on.

I still have memories of the waiting room and the consultation room in the hospital. I remember the physical inspection. Lying on the table, looking out the window, and the feeling of the doctor examining inside my vagina. I remember the doctor taking us into another room to tell my mum that there were clear signs of physical interference, damage internally and confirming that I'd been sexually abused and penetrated, repeatedly for a long time.

My mum had a very strong reaction. She says her world ended; like the foundations and everything in her world was taken away.

Once we had the evidence that I had been sexually abused, the option was to press charges. I wanted to do that because I had a very strong sense of justice. But then when we were with the police going through what would happen, and the court system, I was being told that I would be on the witness stand, in the courtroom alone, with the perpetrator there, and that my mother could not be there because she would be perceived as coaching me. They said "they're going to ask you questions, the perpetrator will be there, he'll be allowed to ask you questions, your mum can't be there." At four years old I was petrified again.

"If you want to do this, we will do it, but you don't have to if this is scary, if you don't want to."

I remember my mum kneeling in front of me, coming down to my height, and saying, "if you want to do this, we will do it, but you don't have to if this is scary, if you don't want to." As I said, she gave me choices a lot, and agency to exercise what power I had in that situation. Even though it was disempowering from the system, but mum gave me a choice I could make for myself. And I said "no, I do not want to be in the same room as him ever again." Not without my mum, being cross examined, alone with my perpetrator who had raped me and made it very clear he was capable of real violence. I had the same feeling of when he'd said, "let's run away together without your mother", physically ill and scared. I thought "hell no."

I know things have changed a lot since then, but that's what I faced, and I chose not to press charges at that time, because the system was not set up to support and protect and I would have been retraumatised. And why should a four-year-old should have to make that bloody choice anyway? I mean he broke the law, there is physical evidence, there should not be a him vs her situation with a child, and he should be charged. Why is it up to the victim? What about the consequences of his actions? He raped a child, a four-year-old.

Mum told my extended family, and some of their responses weren't great either. Sadly, my grandmother, my mother's mum, said, well, "you know little girls. She would have been wriggling in his lap all the time." She minimised his behaviour and put it on me that I had sexually provoked him. And my auntie, my mum's older sister, who was a lawyer, 'kindly' told my mum that "lots of girls who are sexually abused grow up to be prostitutes." That stayed with me.

"You know little girls. She would have been wriggling in his lap all the time."

Sometimes even good families have really bad ideas about this stuff, they really don't get it. It's not a

given that the family is supportive environment for the victim. We're all so conditioned by gender norms and rape culture, the immediate response by many is still to question or blame the victim – deliberately or inadvertently.

Mum got out of the relationship with the perpetrator somehow and I don't recall how that occurred, but she was determined. She got us out of that relationship. About the same time, I went to Europe for about six weeks with my dad and my stepmum.

The next thing I remember, is that Mum and I were living with my stepdad in a new house. At the time I think I felt a bit uncertain of my stepdad. I recall hitting him and trying to get him away from my mum. So I demonstrated protective behaviours towards him and other men in my mum's life after that - even just friends of hers that I'd known before, during, and after the abuse; any man getting physically close to her. I guess it was a little disconcerting to be living with a new man, but because I trusted my mum, and she said it would be okay, what choice did I have? So she moved on to the next relationship with my stepdad, who fortunately is still my stepdad 30 something years later.

By that stage I didn't always trust my mum's judgement either. I trusted her but she'd behaved in ways where she'd put herself at risk at other times. Where we'd been out at a gathering and she would get really drunk, and I'd be the one hailing a taxi for us to get home. So I took on a caring, protective role with her as well.

The abuse was always there, always humming beneath the surface as a potential trigger to upset mum. But she did everything that she could do and really tried to help my healing, so we talked about it plenty, whenever I wanted to. Which was good, and to be honest I didn't really want to a lot, but I always knew that that was an option.

“Don't you want me to talk about what happened?”

I went to a therapist, but I didn't think they were very good. I remember being in therapy and being asked, “just draw something for us, draw whatever you like.” I'm thinking, “sure, but don't you want me to talk about what happened?” Anyway, they said draw anything I like so I did a house, or a koala in a tree. I must have been about six then because I was at school, and I was just like, “what are you doing?” So I said, “this is not helpful Mum.”

Mum would help me process my feelings about the abuse. One technique she liked was to let me, if I felt angry about it go and beat up a box. Mum called it box therapy, where you kick and hit a box, and you could destroy it. I think, being a kid who's experienced abuse, you don't actually feel the same feelings that adults feel around it. So, while my mum might have felt anger and disappointment in herself, and frustration and long-term fears, I just felt scared at the time the abuse occurred, and I guess scared about it happening again. But once I was out of that situation, I was always much more focused on managing my mum's emotions around it. It happened when I was so young. I hadn't learnt all of the dynamics around the judgement and the potential lifelong impact, and all the stuff that adults are cognisant of and therefore scared about, or angry about. You just don't have that as a three and four-year-old.

I always felt acutely different, like I knew stuff about life that other kids didn't, so that was always interesting. And I felt that had ramifications as I was a kid and interacting with other adults. I was acutely aware of men's interest in me, and therefore their behaviour towards me. I think you could call it vigilant, aware of potential threats.

The abuse I have experienced in the past might be similar or different to the

current or future threats I face. *Follow My Lead*

When I was 18, just out of school, one of my long-time childhood friends lived in the city and had started on the party scene. She was taking drugs. I was hanging out with her and I sometimes taking drugs with her.

My mum and stepdad lived in this sleepy little village on the outskirts of the city, so that was just like, 'I'm a young adult, I need to go and live my life.' So I moved to the city and moved in with my auntie again.

My friend had been dating one of the dealers that she knew at that time. And the guy that became my boyfriend was one of his friends, and I hated him. I thought he was the biggest dick, and I should have stuck with that, but I didn't.

After the summer the social group was sort of breaking up, but I could still be in contact with this guy that I didn't like because he sold drugs. , and I think I held on to contact with him as a nostalgic way to try to maintain contact with the group. I'd met up with him one evening to buy drugs, and we had hung around for a bit. I'd mentioned it to my mum, and she was like, "oh don't you like him?" And I was like, "no," but something in that conversation changed my perspective. I was like, oh, "maybe I should give him a chance," which was stupid, I should not have questioned my instinct because of my mum's question. Not that she gave me advice to date him, but it was just, that conversation I remember prompted me to reconsider.

He put on the charm after that first time catching up as individuals. He'd do the flowers, he'd be sweet and send me nice messages, and that sort of stuff, and very keen to spend time with me, which is flattering even if you don't necessarily like the person all that much.

By this time, I had a little studio apartment, and that's when I started seeing him more regularly, when I was alone there. It was probably part loneliness. It's hard, living out of home by yourself for the first time, there's not a lot of people who have the time to spend with you, and I'd moved away from most of my social circle. I didn't have a car, but he'd come and see me, and he'd come to me with party drugs, and be like, "let's have fun." I was like, "Yes, okay, sure." I think that was unfortunately a very real part of my decision making at the time, which wasn't healthy but seemed beneficial, or at least selfish.

He had a nice family. I was 18, and he was maybe 25, so he was working and earning a decent wage, which was exciting at the time. So we started hanging out, and then before I knew it, we were living together. I don't know why. I just look back on that period and go, 'why did I do any of that?' We rented an apartment, the two of us, alone initially, and then we had another friend of his, who I ended up being very close with, move in with us as an extra person.

He was irresponsible with his money. So even though he'd get paid a lot more than me, it would be, oh "but I went to the pub, and I don't have money now to pay the bills." I was usually paying at least half of, if not most of the rent, and the food shopping, and the bills. Because he'd promise to pay, but if you didn't get it off him on pay day it was gone, and on pay day, he'd go out.

"I went to the pub, and I don't have money now to pay the bills."

He'd go to the pub and stuff that I wasn't interested in, so I'd be at home and he'd often get into fights and come home bloodied and damaged. He had a temper and could be violent. So I knew that.

I was the responsible one with my money. Because I wanted to keep the lights on and be fed. It meant that my ability to use my resources was limited; it limited my ability to socialise and that sort

of thing. So, there was the money stuff, that meant that I didn't have the freedoms that I would have liked as a financially independent person.

When he'd come home, that's when the verbal abuse started. He'd be like, "where's dinner, you bitch?" He'd start insulting me, "I've been out, I've been at work, what the fuck are you doing?" Well, I was at work too, and I came home, and I'm making dinner. But I just shrank away from it. I didn't want it to escalate, because I knew he could be violent. He was never violent with me, but I knew that he could be violent so that was intimidating and scary.

I met some other friends during that time as well. There were mutual friends that we would socialise with, which was fine, but if I went out without him, I'd get the abusive texts, like, "who are you with?" I'm thinking, "well you know who I'm with, because I told you." And then it would escalate, just like frequent texting and then more frequent texting. I remember being out with a couple of girlfriends, and he'd send me texts like, "what the fuck are you doing you stupid slut? You're out there trying to hook up," when I was just out with girlfriends. I would try and hide it from them. I knew it wasn't right, and I felt ashamed.

"What the fuck are you doing you stupid slut?"

This was the bit that catches me out, right? I knew better. I had this whole life of prepping me to not be a statistic, a repeating pattern, and I was repeating the pattern. Like I'd failed my mum. Because I thought I've made these choices, but I'm clearly just living out this victim pattern, and that's just dumb. And I felt added shame around that, but also that it was my problem to fix. Who was I to ask other people about relationship stuff? And it wasn't like it was violent in a physical way, so what do you tell people? "I'm scared." "Why? Has he hit you?" "No." "Oh, well what are you scared of?", right?

I think there was also a sense of duty and commitment, like I've chosen this, I'm doing this. I had known I'd gone against my good judgement in the first case, and been like, "well that's what you get if you're with someone you didn't like". So I had a whole bunch of internal stuff going on.

I know now it was not my fault. It was not the pathology of me having been abused as a child that lead me into a relationship with an abusive guy. It wasn't me as someone who had this experience that allowed it then to happen again. It's actually the nature of the perpetration; it's a process of damaging someone else's sense of self in order to dominate them.

The whole time I was in that relationship I was fighting against it consciously. So, I think in some ways I was much better prepared to recognise it and know what it was and get out sooner. We were together for maybe a year and a bit.

I went overseas for two months during that relationship and I went back to it, even though I was determined not to, and then I did. Because where else was I going to go? All my stuff was there in the apartment I shared with him, and he was like, "I've missed you so much." He was just so pathetic, he was just so, "I need you and you're the only good thing in my life." He was just a pathetic human. It sounds really awful and crushing but he was. I felt sorry for him.

My body and mind suffer from the violence and coercion. *Follow My Lead*

I developed serious eating and digestive issues through that relationship, as well as drug dependency; I was using marijuana daily. At first it was a social, fun thing to do, but it developed into a crutch for just not having to deal with things; I'd get stoned and 'blob out'. He also helped feed the dependency on drugs and hence on him by encouraging me to increase how often I smoked and then being my supplier.

The eating disorder was really awful, I basically couldn't hold down any food, like I was down to 48, 50 kilos. I was really unwell. It wasn't that I induced myself to vomit, my body just rejected all food. He'd enabled my eating disorder too. I'd try to eat something, and I'd be throwing up, and he'd help me. He had this technique where he could hold my ribs and it would allow me to vomit even better. He thought he was doing a therapeutic thing, helping me, and to be fair it did actually feel better. It wasn't bulimia. I've always loved food, and it wasn't like, I need to be skinny, there was no body dysmorphia kind of stuff going on. I was acutely aware how skinny I was.

I think it was a manifestation of me not coping in that situation. And asking for help, in a way that got attention that I couldn't ask for help verbally. Not that I got help. People were concerned about me, but no one went, "oh you're so sick, what's going on at home?"

I had a female doctor that I used to go to. I'd tell her I was struggling to eat, I was struggling to keep stuff down, but she never asked. Not even, "how's your mental health, do you have bulimia?" I

No one ever asked, "what's happening for you?"

would have said "no," but that would have been an obvious question. I felt debilitated in the relationship, and I was manifesting a relationship with food that was debilitating

also. That ended pretty quickly after the relationship. But no one ever asked, "what's happening for you." I could have just told them what was going on, but I clearly had no faith that that would prompt them to take any action in any way.

I also don't think, this is nearly 20 years ago, if I'd said, "my boyfriend swears at me and sends me gross text messages, and is shit with money," people wouldn't have had the understanding they do now. I was aware it was abuse because my self-talk was like, 'I'm repeating the pattern, I'm doing this to myself, how am I doing this to myself? So stupid that I'm doing this to myself.'

I think I always wanted to get out, but the longer I was there, the harder it seemed to do. Without the money, the finances, how would I leave that situation?

When our flatmate moved in, it changed things. It didn't stop him from being verbally gross towards me, but I think it was a protective element, because he'd come home and I'd be there with another person, another male as well. So, probably it might have made him feel a bit jealous as well, he was pretty good at being jealous. But yes, I think it did provide a buffer, I certainly felt safer. He would still be rude and verbally abusive or dismissive of me, so my flatmate was aware of the dynamic in the relationship, maybe not all of it, but he was like, "this is shit, he's shit, he's dumb and shit," and I was like, "I know right?" So I had a buddy which was really beneficial. He was a crazy left-wing radical kind of thinker, so he was always fun and he provided me the intellectual stimulation that I definitely didn't get in that relationship.

"This is shit, he's shit, he's dumb and shit."

I knew he was solid with me, and I knew he'd seen it. He made it clear in his body language that he didn't approve, but that he wasn't going to confront him in a visible, combustible way, because I think he was scared too. He became like a brother to me, still is.

I'd listened to a lot of music about escaping, and something clicked, and I was like, I'm going to leave. Music's always been, given my parents are musicians, a big way of me relating to the world. And knowing myself, so I had found music that helped me get into that state of mind.

It took having my flatmate at the time being like, "I'll move with you, and we'll get my parents to go guarantor on the lease on the new place," to get out.

I eventually told Mum, I was like, "can you come and help me?" And she went into battle mode and

got me out. Physically helping me move and getting me out, and being prepared, that he might turn up and be violent. She psyched herself up, physically and she was ready for a fight if she needed to. Thankfully that didn't eventuate.

After that, he would turn up at my workplace, stuff would go missing from my washing line, even for a couple of years afterwards he'd still call me.

“You know what, just fuck off.”

I remember being in a favourite restaurant of mine and he called my number. I think all he got out was “hi there,” and I was like, “you know what, just fuck off,” and hung up. It was amazing I didn't feel scared anymore, I just felt annoyed. So up until that point when the phone rang, I'd be scared, I'd be anxious, I'd be, “oh God, it's him, what do I do?” But this time the feeling was strong and powerful, I just simply said, you can fuck off. That was probably two years after the relationship ended. That was really empowering. My friend was looking at me across the table, like, “what? What happened there?”

I don't know what changed. I think so much of what changes is internal. I think it was my knowing that I wasn't afraid of him, and he held no sway over my life, and I had a choice, and my choice was to tell him to go away.

I anticipate and respond to threats and risks wherever I go, with whoever I meet and whatever I do. *Follow My Lead*

I'm often the responsible one in a social setting, because of the protective behaviours I've learned around my mum. But also because my mum always taught me about personal safety, my whole life. So, I make sure I always know, if I'm anywhere, I look like I know where I'm going. Keep my bag strap across my body, hold on to my bag, don't wear my hair in a plait, all these things; I'm never so out of it that I can't make decisions for myself.

I always maintained control, and I was always the one making sure they got home safe. I'd go, “text me when you get home” or if I dropped them off, “I'm waiting here until I see you go in your door,” all those sorts of protective behaviours, and asking women, when they were with their friends, “are you really okay to stay here with this guy? Do you want me to take you home?” All those sorts of things.

And I think I'm quite attuned to other people's motivations. My empathy's always been high, but I think I also use that as a tool to understand my surroundings. I'm aware of doing those things all the time. I'm very aware of how to maintain my own personal safety and those of my friends around 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.

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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](#) 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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