

* 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.

Lee

I was a very socially anxious and shy person when I met the abuser, his name is Wayne. When I met Wayne, I hadn't been with anyone for quite a while. I had never experienced abuse in past relationships – I didn't know what domestic violence was. During the decades Wayne abused me, the 1980s and 1990s, no one in my family, or friendship group ever talked about domestic violence and certainly no one acknowledged the more subtle forms of domestic violence, such as coercive control. There was no language for that. Domestic violence wasn't in the media. Domestic violence was a secret, and it was kept hidden within the family home. No-one outside of my home knew what Wayne was doing to me. No-one talked about it. Wayne abused me for over 20 years.

That social silence and secrecy was one of the big reasons that I didn't realise Wayne was controlling me. Wayne used coercive control tactics right from the very beginning of the relationship. In the beginning I just thought Wayne was being overly romantic even though a lot of his behaviours made me think "I don't like being treated that way". Wayne would constantly turn up at my place without my permission – he wouldn't even let me know he was coming. He did this before we started going out together. He would just turn up. Initially I said to him, "Wayne, now is not a good time for you to be here". But he would just say, "oh, I can't stand to be alone, I need to be with you". Because of his control and manipulation, I thought I was in love with him.

When we became a couple, Wayne would interrogate me every day about where I had been, who I had talked to. He would say to me, "oh, I'd prefer you wear this when we go out together, or why don't you change your hair?" He was monitoring everything I did. He dismissed my opinions. If I ever disagreed with him or even if I tried to discuss these things, he would say "You are just imagining it" or "you are talking rubbish". He would also say, "I love you, I can't be without you" and then he would blame me for his behaviour. He did this continuously. He would say, "well, you made me act that way, because of what you did". Wayne never showed any remorse. The closest Wayne came to acknowledging his use of control and violence was when he would say to me "I'm a street angel and a home devil" and he would always laugh after saying that.

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Wayne knew when and how to be flattering and dismissive - he would just override every concern I had about his behaviour. Early in the relationship with Wayne, I was living with my flatmate. Often when Wayne would come over, my flatmate would be too scared to come out of her bedroom. I remember he came around one evening and he was strangling me in my bedroom. I remember was beginning to lose consciousness. Somehow, I got my knees up under his arms and kicked him in the stomach. Wayne stopped. His initial reaction was complete surprise. He just looked at me, stunned, as if to say, "wow. You've hit back". That time, my response stunned him enough to stop. He actually praised me for retaliating in a way that he

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understood. But I could see that my response didn’t make him think, “oh, why has she done this? Maybe I have done something seriously wrong to drive her to respond so forcefully?” No, he didn’t think that. He said to me, “oh, so you’re a bit of a fighter yourself, well done...”.

Sometimes, we would go out together at night. One night he saw me give a kiss on the cheek to another man and hug another person. It didn’t mean a thing to me. I am just an affectionate person. Wayne waited until we got home and then he abused me for hours. He said, “you flaunted yourself. You are a

slut”. He was careful to never say any of this stuff in front of his friends, so they weren’t aware of his capacity for abuse. I firmly said back to him “no, that’s not at all what I did”. But Wayne just insisted “you’re wrong, you’re stupid, your opinions don’t mean anything. I know better than you and you are a slut”. In the end, I just started thinking, “my God, maybe I am. Maybe I shouldn’t have touched that person. Maybe that other person thought I was being sexual?”

We moved in together. Wayne turned my head upside down and inside out. I started to believe everything he said because I believed he was a rational, normal man. I thought he had good reasons to say what he did to me. I wouldn’t bring anything up with Wayne that I was unhappy with. I tried so hard to be the person he wanted me to be. I started placating and agreeing with Wayne about everything. I ended up believing any problem was my fault, and I that I was responsible for fixing the problem and for fixing myself. So, I stopped talking to Wayne’s friends and to any males at all. I thought this would stop Wayne’s jealousy and stop him from screaming at me when we got home. This is what I did to try to tone his verbal abuse down – it was a strategic way of ‘keeping the peace’. But Wayne did not reduce his abuse or his attempts to control me, he intensified his abuse. Instead of calling me a “slut” for talking to male friends he said, “you’re a snob, and you’re boring. I’m not taking you out anymore, you won’t speak to my friends”. I could never predict how he would react. One moment he’d be saying, “talk to my friends, or you’re a snob”, and the next moment he would scream at me for “being a slut” for talking to them.

One time, Wayne abused me for putting a pair of jeans on. He said, “you look hideous when you wear house clothes. You don’t dress up for me. You’re so ugly in day clothes”. He continued, “go back into the bedroom and wear your short dress, high heels and stockings”. So, I did. He reacted, and said to me, “see you are so beautiful when you dress that way. I love the way you dress, when you dress up like that”. In that moment I was convinced that Wayne was fine about me wearing these things. But when we went out, I was the centre of attention. I actually hated being dressed like that and I was uncomfortable with all the unwanted attention from other men. When we got home Wayne started abusing me and saying, “why did you wear that dress? You’re a slut, everyone was staring at you”. Then he would turn around and say, “oh, I love you so much, you’re beautiful, no matter what you wear, wear what you want”. His unpredictable behaviour was designed to mess my head.

Wayne isolated me very quickly from my own support systems. I was surrounded by his friends and his family and had no connections of my own. His family, his mother in particular, sided with him throughout. Wayne and his mother had a particularly toxic close relationship where he always put her on a pedestal and did whatever she said. Wayne’s mother took his side even when I showed her bruises on my back, arms and legs from his assaults. I remember

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once saying to her, “you don’t realise what’s going on at home”. I showed her several bruises on my arms. His mother looked at the bruises and said to me, “what did you do to make him so angry? I have noticed how tired, angry, stressed and overworked Wayne is lately. You’re just not being a good enough wife.” She also said to me “what have you got to complain about? You’ve got a business, you’ve got a great husband, he works hard, he looks after you”. So, that was the culture I was surrounded with. It was true that we had a great business, and we made a lot of money. We had a beautiful house. We had everything. On the outside it looked perfect, and I want to keep that impression for myself as well. I didn’t have time to think about the abuse, nor could I, because I kept believing he would stop when he realised it was wrong. I wish someone had tapped me on the shoulder saying, “I can see you’re being abused. Would you like me to help?” I didn’t have any help like that for another 20 years.

After Wayne’s mother said that to me, I started to wonder whether the violence was really as bad as I thought it was. Her message was very clear that his violence was a reasonable and justified response to whatever I was or was not doing. From this point I really started to accept that whatever abuse Wayne metered out and I accepted that it was my fault, because everyone around me was saying, “it’s your fault, it’s your fault...” I started to do whatever it took to be the person that a perpetrator doesn’t think he needs to abuse.

Within a couple of months of speaking with his mother, Wayne assaulted me so violently that I should have been hospitalised. I ended up with aneurisms and traumatic brain injury as a result. But because I didn’t access any medical services at the time, these injuries were not identified for another 35 years. I didn’t go to work for some time after this. Wayne’s family saw the bruises on me. This time Wayne’s mother admonished Wayne and said, “God, you shouldn’t be hitting her around the face. They’ll put you in an asylum or jail you”. In other words, she was saying, “if you’re going to hit her, make sure it’s not visible”. One time after Wayne assaulted me, my next-door neighbour took me to hospital, and she wanted me to lay charges. At that time, I was too afraid to report Wayne’s abuse and I said “no”. My initial reaction was to recoil. I immediately denied it. I felt so ashamed. When I went back to work, I still had bruises around my neck and one of my colleagues asked me if Wayne had assaulted me. She said “I don’t believe you when you tell everyone you’ve just fallen down the stairs. How can I help?” I denied Wayne’s violence again because I was too scared. I felt enormous fear. Most people don’t understand that. I felt ashamed for lying. I just didn’t think people would understand. I thought they would blame me for staying with Wayne for so long and for putting up with his abuse. This is what I had been told by his family. I felt I was at fault. When people came to me and said, “I know you’re being abused. Do you want to talk about it?” I immediately thought to myself “no I am not, I’m at fault, it’s my problem and I can fix it”. They were the only two people throughout that whole time, the whole twenty years, that offered me help.

I didn’t realise Wayne was abusing me and I didn’t start naming his abuse as domestic violence, until two years before I left him. At this point I had four young children with Wayne. We were on a property about 67km from town. We were very isolated. My husband had the keys to the car. He would lock the front gate so that we couldn’t leave. Me and my children were basically prisoners. I wasn’t allowed to parent. That was another form of abuse. Wayne’s mother did a lot of the parenting and gave them everything they wanted. But whenever Wayne and his mother were out of

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the house, my children and I pretended that everything was normal, and we would have fun. I would read to the kids, and we would play with their toys together when they were younger. Our favourite thing to do was to play in the garden. The kids and I would go and collect rocks and build rock pools around the garden to give the birds and animals water to drink.

It was extremely difficult to hide Wayne's abuse from the children. I know that most of the time my children were hiding in their bedrooms hearing what Wayne was doing to me. Sometimes I thought that must be worse for them because I knew their imaginations would take over. I found out much later that my eldest child had rung a children's helpline about Wayne's violence. My child's conversation was recorded, and this came out later in a legal report. My daughter retaliated against Wayne when he was abusing me, she took the home mobile phone and tried to ring the police. But Wayne took it off her and broke it front of her while screaming "if you ever try to help your mother

"If you ever try to help your mother again, I will cut your hands off".

again, I will cut your hands off". After that she just shrank back into herself, and never again did she try to stop him from physically assaulting me. My children suffered with headaches, sickness, vomiting, they kept getting colds all the time. My children wanted to stay home from school. These were all responses to Wayne's abuse.

Wayne's violence got worse, and he threatened me that if I left him, that he would keep the children and that he would make sure that I wouldn't have any financial resources. Wayne also threatened to kill me. I took all of Wayne's threats seriously and I believed he would make it all happen. Wayne's family and his friends also told me repeatedly and directly, "we'll stick up for him, and you'll lose the children if you leave him". I'm very strong mentally, and throughout the abuse, I kept telling myself that "he hadn't killed me yet". I knew how to stay alive and I was committed to looking after my children until we could leave. I also believed him when he said he would kill me if I tried to leave with the children. I did whatever I could for the kids' sake. I chose to remain with Wayne because I also believed that he was rational. I just kept believing I was to blame, and that somehow, I'd figure out the key to it. I felt responsible for keeping the family unit intact, because I somehow believed that one day, we would be a normal family. I really thought that he would somehow realise that what he was doing was hurting us. It took years before I realised that he would never take responsibility for his violence.

What changed was the day that Wayne kicked me in front of my children. Up until this time, Wayne had always tried to hide his violence against me from others. This time, he kicked me so hard that I flew across the room, and while I was on the ground he said, "you'll get more of that if you don't behave". I saw the horrified looks on my

children's faces. They were clinging to each other, and they were pleading with Wayne, "stop, don't hurt mum". They looked really scared and that was the first time I had actually seen my children's reactions to Wayne's abuse. I walked out the house and I kept walking. I didn't go back. I walked to a refuge. I spoke to a worker at the refuge, but she pressured me to report Wayne's violence and threats to the Police. I was too afraid, and I just wanted to get back to my kids. So, a few hours later I went back to the house and back to Wayne. I stayed in touch with the refuge workers who insisted that Wayne and I go to relationship counselling. So, we went to a

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Christian marriage counsellor, and she said in the first session, “you are both at fault”. So that just reinforced what I had always been told, that I was at fault, or equally at fault. When we got home from the counselling Wayne said to me “you’re at fault just as much as I am”, and he didn’t change. Another few years went by. Wayne started raping me more frequently and he was increasingly sexually sadistic. I understood then that his use of sexual violence was changing, going up to a new level and this really frightened me. I’m not a physically violent person, and I have never been. On one occasion, I responded physically to resist Wayne’s violence. Wayne was beating me very badly. I just snapped and punched him on the side of his head. The blow created a wound on his head, and the sight of his blood sickened me. He stopped beating me and in that moment I ran away from him and hid in another room in the house. I felt sickened by the physicality of the violence.

In the same week, one of my children came to me, and took me to mine and Wayne’s bedroom and showed me a gun. She had seen her father holding the gun and Wayne said to her “I am going shoot mummy if she is naughty”. My child also handed me one of their drawings and explained it was of “Daddy shooting Mummy” and the image showed lots of blood spurting out of my neck. My child later took this drawing to school and it alerted school counsellors to what was happening. I realised that the children were being abused as much as I was. I rang a local domestic violence refuge and said, “what do I do?” I told the workers about the most recent sexual assaults and the gun. As soon as the workers heard about this, they notified the Child Protection Services. Child Protection became involved, and they took the children away, and they took me to a refuge. I didn’t have a choice in the matter. I believe I needed help from these services because I would never have been able to leave by myself.

Outside support was the only way we were going to get away safely. Social services took charge and removed us all because he had easy access to guns and other weapons. We weren’t allowed to return to the home. They took us away and moved us interstate as far as possible from the abuser, but by doing so, I was left without resources. I had no access to my finances. Wayne had cleaned the bank account out. I also wasn’t eligible for welfare payments at that time because my name was on a house and a business. The only women’s refuge available and that would take me, and my children was a refuge designed exclusively for migrant victims. The refuge staff realised that they were our only option and without them we would be homeless. We were lucky they let us stay there free of charge until I finally started receiving welfare payments.

My family couldn’t understand why it took me so long to disclose. A couple of them did blame me and said “how could you put yourself and your children through all of that? We’re really upset now that we know from the extent of the abuse, why didn’t you tell us earlier?” I didn’t tell anyone because I believed that I would be judged. The longer I stayed with Wayne the more I believed him, and this compounded the blame and shame I was experiencing. I blamed myself and felt ashamed and so over time I increasingly did not want to disclose to outside sources.

It took me a further 15 years after I left, before I understood that I had nothing to be ashamed of, and nothing to be blamed for either. But I took that shame and blame with me for a long time. I will talk about this openly now because I really want people to understand. I have been studying counselling and the biggest thing I learned from that was that when you have a client in front of you

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who is disclosing abuse, you don't tell them what to do or direct them. When you take control, for the victim this is similar to the abuser taking control away from them.

In the end it cost me. I thought once we left, that my children and I would start having a proper, normal life free of abuse. But Wayne hid the abuse in other ways. While he couldn't physically abuse us anymore, he did his best to maintain his control in every other way. He did it through lawcourts, threats of litigation and by removing all of the money from the joint bank account. Wayne also stalked me. Wayne chose to continue abusing me by phoning my mobile between 20 - 30 times a night. He would call the children at times other than those court appointed telephone access times. He would call the children on their mobile phones and say things to them like "you know it's your mother's fault for breaking us up". He kept telling my children "Your mum is abusing you now. If you come back, she'll follow, and we can become a happy family again". He also said, "she's exaggerating what happened, I didn't do that". So, I would take their phones from them to stop them receiving his awful messages. But this created so much discord between my children and I. Fortunately, at that time technology wasn't as advanced as it is today, so he couldn't track me through a tracking device or anything.

In Family Court, he accused me of perpetrating domestic violence, "she abused me as much as I hurt her", and "she was the abuser, not me". Wayne told the Judge about the one day where I hit him the side of the head. He of course, left out the part where he had kicked and punched me to the ground. Wayne's mother and other family members also said in court that I was abusive, not the father. Their lies completely turned the judge's head. I was self-litigating because I had run out of money after spending \$33,000 on representation. Because I was self-litigating, I had to cross-examine the abuser. His barrister had brought up my so-called abuse I had to try and defend what "I'd done".

Even though I could provide evidence of Wayne's violence and abuse against me, the court dismissed it. The Family Law Court gave Wayne unsupervised access to my children, and eventually custody of them. The family court Judge said, "as long as the father doesn't directly abuse the children, they'll be fine with him. They can have equal custody, or unsupervised access". But my children, and particularly Kirra continuously described how Wayne's abuse affected her, and it went against everything the Family Court had been saying. For seven years, my daughter Kirra, continually told the child court writer, the independent children's lawyer and the mediator, that she did not want to go to see the father under any circumstances. Kirra only agreed to supervised access with Wayne when someone was there watching them. But for seven years no one listened. They kept on putting in their report that "the child and the father are doing well, and they are communicating well at their meetings". This wasn't the case. Kirra would come back from meeting with her father, and she would be so distressed and hide in her room.

All the legal professionals involved said that I was being "vindictive and alienating the father". It wasn't until Kirra banged her head against the cupboard repeatedly, said that she wanted to kill

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herself and had to be sedated that they would listen. I went to court and told them about Kirra and got an independent psychologist. He interviewed my daughter for hours across different sessions. Finally, he wrote a report saying, "this child cannot go back to her father. She can't have access either because she has suicidal ideation". Finally, the court listened. But even though the court understood that she was suicidal and distressed following contact with her father, they never acknowledged that Wayne was a perpetrator.

But after seven years of fighting, my other children decided to go back to live with Wayne. He manipulated them too and I think they believed him. I can understand that they wanted to return to familiar surroundings and friends. Also, I had nothing in the way of finances, so I couldn't provide for them the way they were all used to. Because Wayne's mother spoilt them, my children were used to having whatever they wanted, when they want it.

My eldest son, Jude, went to live with Wayne. At the same time I laid charges against Wayne. The Police began what would become a two-year investigation, and they had gathered enough evidence about Wayne's abuse that they were considering formally charging him. The Police called Wayne in for an interview, and Wayne took Jude with him. Jude told the Police that I abused him, and that I abused his siblings. The Police rang me and said, "look, we're going to leave the investigation open. But we're not going to take it any further. We're not going to formally charge him".

After ten years, Jude visited me and he said, "Mum, I will be feeling very guilty for the rest of my life about what I did. I told the Police that you abused me because I had already lost you, and I didn't

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want to lose my dad too. I love him. I know what he did, but I can't help loving him, and I didn't want to lose him at the same time". All my kids have received years of counselling, they are all now as well as they can be. Kirra is now a lawyer and she advocates for victim's rights. She is absolutely amazing. Jude and his brothers have in recent years become feminist men, and they all have really lovely partners. No matter how dark it is, never lose that hope, things can and will get better.

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'.

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

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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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.
