

* 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.

Olivia

I met David when I was 30 through a friend from Church. I was a dental assistant. I was paying off a mortgage on my own place in Sydney. I met David who was also a dentist at a dentistry conference. He was about a decade older than me. When we met, he was living with his mum and dad. Right from the beginning of our marriage, I knew something wasn't quite right with David. I kept getting a screwed up feeling in my stomach whenever we were together. My mind was like a cage. I could almost feel the shutters going down around my face. He worked really hard to pull the shutters down too. David was a bit like the characters you see on television crime series; the men who murder their wives and try to hide it.

In the beginning I noticed a few inconsistencies in David's behaviour. Initially, when David came around to visit me at my place, he gave me whatever I wanted. He often helped me around the home. If we had a meal together, he would help me do the washing up and stuff like that. But I did notice that whenever I went around to visit him at his mum and dad's place, that his mum would clean up before the meal, cook the meal and then she would wash up after the meal. David wouldn't help her at all. I also knew that David's grandfather treated his grandmother and his mum very badly. So, misogyny and violence ran right through David's family. Both of David's parents lived with disabilities. I know that they were both incredibly strict. They tightly controlled David, but they were also dependent on him. They relied on David to help them function. David had enormous contempt for both his parents but especially his mother. He never once sent her a Mother's Day or birthday message.

I really believed that David would help me around the house and that he would be good to me. We had only been dating for just a few weeks when David moved in with me. The moment he moved in with me, he refused to help me with anything around the home. He didn't lift a finger.

**“You will, forever,
pay for that”.**

There were other disturbing aspects about David's behaviour. He started courses but rarely finished any of them. Even though David was a medical professional, he was an anti-vaxxer. He was very secretive and protective about his activities and ideas. David set a trap for me very quickly. He proposed and gave me a \$20 fake wedding ring as though it was the real thing. I knew it was fake, but I pretended it was the real thing too, just to keep the illusion going. I married him after a fast engagement of one month and I fell pregnant right away. While I was pregnant, most nights, David refused to sleep next to me. Even on our wedding night, David was gone. I spent the whole night alone, on my own, I have no idea where he went. David and I were supposed to spend a week away on our honeymoon together. But David didn't have any money and he wasn't working at that time. So, I had to go back to work the day after our wedding night. One time after work I came home, and he was trying to fix the juicer. It was broken and I had

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already planned to buy a new one. But David had spent all day tinkering with it. He thought what he had done was amazing even though it was still broken. I wasn't too thrilled about his tinkering and said something like, "Why would you do that? I thought we were just going to get a new one." I knew I didn't give him the "perfect response" that he expected of me. This was one of the few times I said something honestly and directly that criticised his opinion of himself. He said, "you will, forever, pay for that". A few days later David went to our Church Minister to complain about my "independence". David told me he had discussed "my behaviour" with the Minister, and the Minister had agreed with David that I was indeed "too independent". After that, David put pressure on me to sell my home and move into rental accommodation with him. David told me the place we would be moving into meant that we could stay rent-free. I believed him and said, "Oh, that would make sense, if we can get it rent-free and it's closer to your work, then we could actually save petrol". So, I agreed. I put my house on the market, packed everything and moved into a rental property with David. But I learned as soon as we had moved in that we were expected to pay rent. This is how David got his way.

While I was selling my home, the mortgage still had to be paid off each fortnight because the house didn't sell straight away. On top of that I now had to pay rent. David had a massive credit card debit and lots of loans and yet he was disappointed that I had not paid off more on my home loan. I had previously paid off the loan on my car. I wanted to maintain my credit rating. But David refused to get up on the weekends to help me clean the house so that we could get the house ready for sale. I was always on the very bottom of his list of priorities.

Later we went to the bank to get rated for our own home loan. The people from the bank asked David, "What have you got, mate? What are your assets?" All he could give them was a list of all his loans. We had his credit card debt we had to pay off. We had his bank loan to pay off, plus his business loan. I can remember the bank manager just looking at me. He didn't say a word but now I can understand the look he gave me. The bank didn't give us the loan and so we had to just keep renting. I felt powerless. But it gets worse, doesn't it. Financially we were really in trouble, because I had to stop work because I was pregnant. I worked right up until I was vomiting too much from my pregnancy. I was so sick. I just couldn't keep going to work. Luckily, I had a small bit of money from my grandfather's inheritance, and this paid for my son's birth. Otherwise, I don't know what we would have done.

My house had finally sold but I didn't get very much for that. So, we were broke. We had to move in with two Christian friends, Toni and Craig. We were at Toni and Craig's house for about three months. Then we had to move on again. During the first few years of marriage, we ended up moving 19 times. One time we moved into the back of a shop because one of Toni and Craig's friends owned a shop. We had to stay there so we could save up a deposit for a home. But it was really awkward because I always had to leave during the day because it was a shop, so the workers came in 9am – 5pm. Our friends were really just trying to help us out, but this was a terrible situation. David's car kept breaking down too. So, we had to trade it in. I also traded in my car and together we got a second-hand car. But it was one financial difficulty after another. We lived in the shop for about six months. We should've had enough for a deposit by this point because we were able to save up some money during this time. But instead of putting that money towards a home, David decided to buy another car - a new car, without my knowledge. He said he didn't like the second-hand car because he thought it was "beneath" him. All I can remember is I had gone from being so close to owning my own home to just moving all the time.

When our first baby was born, David refused to do anything. Influenced by a religious doctrine about having a large family, we had 2 girls and 5 boys together over the course of our relationship. But David never changed a single nappy. One time we went grocery shopping together. I asked David to take our baby for a bit and he just sort of collapsed and said, "I am not doing that". So, I had to carry the baby myself while we shopped for groceries. My stomach screwed up. I had a sick feeling in my stomach that moved up my chest and I felt like I was being choked. I put incredible energy into trying to do good and to being good by doing, doing, doing. I also felt like I was never going to be good enough.

But I knew I had to keep doing everything I could for David's approval because at any hint of a disagreement with him, David would rent out violent pornographic videos and watch them. I responded in a way that mimics headless chickens. When farmer's slaughter chickens by chopping their head off, sometimes their headless bodies keep running around. That is exactly how I felt.

David and I accepted Biblical teachings and principles and that children need to be disciplined. David's Church group had given us a list of books on home births, home school, and home discipline. David brought home some of these books for me to read but he didn't read them. I was the diligent one and I did all the things in those books. I went along with everything, thinking that if I just did everything right, I would have my family and I would be loved. I was so driven. I gave up everything. David's church friends thought I was the perfect catch for him. I gave up my studies and my work for him and for our family. I came home, looked after the kids, and home-schooled them. That was the plan. That was the theme I had to follow throughout our marriage. When my youngest daughter was beginning to walk, and I asked her to go upstairs for bedtime and she wouldn't go, I looked at David and asked him "what should I do?" and he giggled and said, "use the spoon on her". David requested that I physically discipline our children. It gets locked in my throat. I couldn't go through with it, but David did hit my daughter until she ran up to her room screaming.

David continued to avoid sleeping in the same bed as me. Every night, I would go to bed on my own. Instead of sleeping next to me. David said he needed to go off to his own room and to work on his "accounts". He said he was working on a "special accounting system for his dental business", and I just responded with "Oh, okay".

David would lock himself in "his room" and stay up all night on the computer. He said he did most of his accounting work working from home. He said he needed to be alone in his office all the time. So, he would be in his office throughout the day and the evening, and he wouldn't integrate with the family. He always made sure he had the door to his office locked. That's how he lived, in his room. It was impossible to see what he was doing. This was all to ensure that I couldn't see in. He had programmed his computer so he could shut down everything quickly. One night, by chance, the door wasn't locked and I actually managed to walk into the room to see what he was doing. As I entered the room, I could see him trying to shut everything down on the computer, but for some reason it didn't work. So, I effectively walked in on David while he was trying but failing to shut down all the pornography on his computer. He had set up massive TV screens almost like a home cinema so he could watch porn. He had thousands of images, videos and files open. It took a moment to take it all in. I could see the pornography was all R-rated pornography, very violent and degrading pornography involving very young women and people with disabilities and physical assaults. So, David came up next to me and we were both there in front of the screens. I stood there shocked. It was all out in the open. I started to cry, and I realised that he had been lying to me the whole time about his "accounting system". I needed help so I rang up my friend Toni from church and I said, "what do I do, David's got these pornographic images that he's viewing?" Toni replied, "you're fat, and pregnant, and ugly at the moment. You should expect David to want to look at videos like that". I actually thought my pregnant tummy was quite beautiful, because I had my baby inside.

Initially, David agreed to spend his evenings with me doing something as an alternative to watching porn. He said he would play board games with me instead. So, for a couple of weeks, we played checkers and other fun board games. Those few weeks were the happiest time of my marriage with David. But it didn't last long. One night he abruptly said to me, "I'm bored, because you are boring". He went back to watching pornography and this time he didn't care how I felt about it. He felt justified to do that, because "I

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was so boring”.

Over the next few weeks, I got all these books on pornography and porn addiction. I contacted services and even a priest about his pornography addiction. I really wanted to support David to change his behaviours and his addiction to pornography. I wanted him to read all the books on addiction I had found, but he wouldn't do it. He didn't do one thing. I wanted him to learn how to be a kinder man. In those books was an offering from my heart. I wanted him to change for himself and for our children. His response was, “You are a stupid woman with all these stupid ideas”.

Ultimately, he used all my efforts against me. I kept bringing up his addiction, wanting him to reflect on his behaviour. He started saying that I was invading his privacy. Then he said to me, “if women take their clothes off, then they should expect to be taken advantage of and raped” and he said, “if any woman stood in front of me and took all of her clothes off, I would have no hesitation to stare at her and then I would just take advantage of her”. I was horrified. I thought David was a religious Church going man. I thought he would respect and protect women. So, I responded by reminding him of the Bible stories about Christ. Christ honoured and respected the dignity of all women, and he never took advantage of them. I said, “but wouldn't you be like Christ”? I thought Christ represented everything

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he stood for. But it was like he had projected an image of being one thing and then he became something totally different. I knew he would punish me for saying that, because I did not say, “okay, that's fine, I totally get it”. He said, “never again will I ever share anything honestly with you”. That was the beginning of his use of physical violence against me. David had a black belt in martial arts. He placed his hand over my mouth to prevent me talking and expressing my emotions. He used his skills to inflict injuries on my children without bruising them. He

used his skills to slap me around the face with the least bruising. The first time he hit me, he slapped me around the face. What I did to preserve my dignity, was to strategically agree with and do whatever he wanted me to do. I just kept trying to appease him in the hope he would be kinder to me.

I just felt like I was falling into a pit that was just getting deeper and deeper. So here we were, in debt for the new car he bought and his new dental business. He also employed another female dentist. I did some dental assistant work as well and without pay. We did start to earn a bit of money, but then we moved into a massive rental home. Honestly, it cost us \$500 a week in rent which was enormous at the time. David was trying to show off to other people, to our families and church friends, “oh, look how successful I am”. That's when our sixth child was born. Around this time, David started going away for further “dentistry education”. Sometimes he was away for weeks at a stretch. Sometimes he would fly overseas. One time David left us alone for an entire year. I tried to talk to my parents about my concerns about David's behaviour, but I felt so much shame. My parents didn't really understand what was happening. I didn't feel like I could talk to any of my friends. Although, I had one friend, and she and her husband had split up. She was the only friend who understood what our partners were doing. She knew what to do, she just left him. But I kept trying with David. I would try to get him to go back to that the one time when he was apologetic and at least said he was interested in doing something about his addictions.

One day, David said we needed to go to Germany. He had this crazy idea that he was going to make it big time, financially. Well, that was a joke. But at the time, I thought that I wanted to go there too and that this would be a fresh start for us. I wanted more than anything for him to reflect. I wanted him to get help for his pornography addiction. I wanted him to become a better person through it. David started doing a medical course so he could gain extra qualifications to work in Hamburg. Things were promising. But David only completed one, maybe two modules of the course and he never finished it.

He just didn't have the stamina to finish anything, his whole life was like that. His greatest ability was to maintain his fantasies.

Before we moved to Germany, David told me it was my responsibility to move first and to get a house in Hamburg for all the family. I couldn't believe he put this pressure on me and I was four months pregnant too. Honestly, I did it, like I did everything else. I took my eldest daughter with me who was 12 years old at the time. David stayed in Sydney with my other children. So, I arrived in Germany. It was so dangerous. I didn't feel welcome either. At first, my daughter and I stayed at a Bed and Breakfast place. The owners asked me, "what are you doing here?" I said, "I need to find a house for my family to move into. I am scared, this move has almost cost me my life". But they didn't want to help me. I really felt that they wanted me to leave their country and never come back. It was very hostile.

Fortunately, at a B&B, I met a kind woman, Gaby, who later became my friend. Gaby was German but she was staying at the B&B because she was relocating from Berlin. We hit it off. She kept similar hours to David. She was up at midnight. I would go to bed, then I would come down and she'd still be awake at one o'clock in the morning.. She couldn't stand cockroaches in the B&B, and so I would remove them for her so she wouldn't be frightened. Gaby helped me find a place. It was a needle in a haystack; a home with at least 8 rooms in Hamburg was almost unheard of. Gaby helped me with all the applications too. I also somehow found a midwife and so things were coming together. David and my other children arrived not long after I had set up the house. But it didn't last long. He never treated me like I had any value. I was always being used by David, that's how I felt.

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Within just a few months of him arriving, things spiralled out of control very quickly. The school social worker contacted David and I and said that my daughter had disclosed that we regularly physically disciplined her and her other siblings. The social worker advised us that this practice was child abuse. The social worker requested a meeting between David and I, with a translator, to ensure there were no misunderstandings. David said he did not wish for a translator as he thought it should be a private discussion between us. In the end David didn't go to the meeting. He appeared as though he had no problems and had no need to go. I went to see the social worker by myself. I was a bit embarrassed, but I went again and again. I was so concerned that we were going to get in trouble, so I kept going. I was worried about the reports

from the school social worker, and I started making plans to get the whole family back to Australia. I was trying to save our family and get them back home. I remember saying to David, "let's just forget it, let's just pack up and all go home back to Sydney". He said to me, "why would I give up what I've got now for you?" Because by this point, he had started a new relationship with another woman, Linde. I don't know much about Linde other than she is a German woman.

David was behaving more secretly than usual, because he was trying to hide his new serious relationship. He permanently locked his office door and slept with his mobile phone. One day, I located his office key and got a second key cut, so that I could enter his office. Somehow, he found out about this, and he exploded. David forced me to change my bedroom to the basement of the house. That's where I slept. He screamed at me and ordered me to the basement, and he did this in front of my young kids – they all laughed, it was like they believed that I deserved it. After that, he placed a bolt on his office door so that no one could enter his office. He said to me, "you have been the cause of too many interruptions". So, his door was always locked. I said to David, "we're going to have a divorce, I want a divorce", but really, it was me saying, "I want change". I was going out

looking for help. I remember I did go and visit an attorney in Hamburg. The attorney gave me the right advice. I got a divorce. I didn't like doing it, but I could see that our relationship had become irreparable. David knew that he was losing his grip on me.

It was around this time that David started accusing me of physically abusing our children. His accusations overwhelmed me with shame, feelings of dismay at his betrayal, and remorse. Especially because David had always insisted that I discipline the children and he had in fact assaulted our children on multiple occasions. David walked out on me and our family and at the same time, he withdrew 8,000 Euro. That was our rent money. He took it all to cover his new rent payments. David moved in with his new girlfriend Linde. Suddenly I did not have enough rent money and we were given an eviction notice the very next month. David told my children that the eviction was because the house was dirty because I didn't clean it properly. He blamed everything on me. I tried to tell my kids that we did not receive the eviction notice because the house was dirty, but they didn't accept that. He had really convinced them that it was my fault. He also told the children that I was having an affair which was not true.

David was focussed on winning at any cost. He was using the children against me, and he wanted to have full custody of them. He didn't want the kids for any other reason other than he didn't want to have to pay me child support for all the children – he could not afford that. I breastfed my children, I kissed and loved them. But David told them stories about me so now they have a version of me as the one who caused all their suffering during the divorce in Germany. They have hardened their hearts towards me.

“Do you want to reconcile with your husband? Divorce happens all the time”.

We went through the German Family Law Court system. The first part of this process was mediation. The mediators were two psychiatrists, who both acted against my interests. Both supported the decision for the removal of my children, and together they made this recommendation to the court. Neither could speak English very well. One of the psychiatrists asked me, “do you want to reconcile with your

husband?” I said to them “well, he is not on my top-ten list”. The psychiatrist just responded with “divorce happens all the time”. That was it, she didn't ask any questions about the needs of the children or any questions about domestic violence. They did not use an assessment designed for my children's age. Nor did they listen to my children or support their request to have me in their lives. If they had asked had just asked my children “who tucks you into bed at night” and “who looks after you?” My children would have replied, “mummy does everything”. The psychiatrists also clearly didn't like that I didn't want to talk to David and that I wanted nothing to do with him. They did an assessment on me and concluded that I was only capable of cleaning. They did not support my request to live independently and to care for my children. I was on the bottom of their priorities.

The German Family Law Court believed David and Linde were a good financial option. They appeared to have a stable home environment. Linde was a citizen who soon became David's stay at home wife. I had no job, no finances, no car, and soon, no home. David appeared to own a home, although he lied to the Court about that – he was renting. David also said in Court that I was having an affair and leaving the children at home without supervision and food. David said in Court that I was abusive. Even though it was David who insisted that I use the “home discipline” on the children, he used the “home discipline” as evidence against me. David also told the Court that I was able to earn 65,000 Euros per year as a dental assistant and that I would be able to pay him child support. Even though that was an impossibly high wage, the Judge didn't bat an eyelid. The truth was, despite

my efforts, I couldn't get any work over there. I had mostly been a housewife for 20 years, I didn't speak the language, I was struggling to start again, and I was caring for my newborn baby. Somehow David convinced the Court. My parents, siblings and some of my children's teachers all wrote letters saying that I should have custody of the children and not David. But the German Family Court overlooked all of this and gave David and Linde full custody of all my children. I think their idea was that I would just remarry, and that would solve my problems. But for me, it was the last thing I wanted to do. I just wanted to stand on my own two feet and have my children.

David has just made my life hell. After the German Family Court ruling, I moved back home to Sydney without my children. I was living on handouts through church support. I haven't seen my kids in six years. I've attempted visits at least 4 times. But David has invented reasons why visitation could not proceed. He just doesn't want me to see the kids. It's shocking to me because David never did anything. He used me and yet he has ended up with everything. I do feel down, because there's nothing I can do. I can only give up everything and accept that I'm no longer a mother to my own children. That is the only way I can get on with my life. I am grateful to be alive. Other women in similar situations have been murdered by their husbands. But now, my focus is on letting go, creating change, and justice. That's where I get my source of strength.

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Acknowledgement and thanks

Insight Exchange would like to thank the person with lived experience of domestic and family violence who has generously shared their insights for the benefit of others.

We acknowledge that despite our best efforts to assemble with a person a more accurate representation of some of their experiences of violence, we can never fully understand all that their experiences mean to them now or through their life. We understand that no one's life experience can ever be fully represented in language or any other form.

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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