

## Working Together to Support the Mental Health of People Who Have Experienced Family Violence

I am in my 30s, a single mother to Libby, now aged 11 years.

Prior to my relationship with Libby's father, I worked full-time in marketing and part-time as a singer and actor. We met when I was 22.

Within the first few months of our relationship, the emotional, psychological and social abuse began. It was only 3 months into the relationship when he began abusing me physically.

He would stalk male colleagues he accused me of being involved with. I was consistently put down and my movements monitored - he checked my petrol receipts and the kilometres travelled on my car. He sometimes locked me in the house during the day, taking the keys and my phone. I constantly felt unsafe and alone.

The violence would often occur several times in a day, leaving me with bruises which I attempted to cover with make-up and long-sleeved tops when we were out in public. He threatened to kill me if I told anyone. He ordered me to wear a jumper or skivvy to cover the bruises and strangle marks when the Police attended.

I have a history of anorexia nervosa and experienced bulimia nervosa as a young teenager. My first episode of anorexia nervosa occurred during a previous abusive relationship a few years earlier. There is a family history of anorexia nervosa. My ex would call me 'fat' and 'ugly', amongst other derogatory phrases.

Four years into our relationship, I fell pregnant and was recovering from anorexia nervosa, when the GP I saw told me to *"Eat chips, eat anything. You need to put on weight."*

We moved in together when I was 4 ½ months pregnant. Within two weeks, the violence escalated to the point where I elected to sleep in a separate bedroom. However, he would regularly come into my room in the early morning hours and begin beating me.

During my pregnancy, I would make my way down to the kitchen of the house we shared (for which I paid the majority of the cost for the rent, utilities, food and toiletries) and make myself some breakfast. He would follow me down the stairs, throw my breakfast cereal against the wall once I had prepared it, swear, call me a "fat pig" and demand I clean it up, getting in my face and yelling "clean it up, bitch!"

As a public patient I wasn't engaged with an OB-GYN during my pregnancy. Instead, I was under the 'shared care' program, between my local GP and midwives at the hospital. My GP and the hospital provided medical treatment when I was beaten unconscious at 6 ½ months pregnant.

This is a de-identified vignette.

Continued over page >>

Mental Health  
Professionals' Network

Emirates House  
Level 8  
257 Collins Street  
Melbourne  
VIC 3000

postal  
PO Box 203  
Flinders Lane  
VIC 8009

email  
contactus@mhpnp.org.au

telephone  
1800 209 031

www.mhpnp.org.au

Following Libby's birth, I struggled to secure day-care for her. This impacted my ability to return to work. I had a minimal support network as my partner had isolated me from friends and I had no family support.

Limited money and the disclosure of domestic violence by the real estate agency to prospective landlords and rental agencies impacted my ability to secure new rental premises for about 6 months. This meant my baby and I lived between the townhouse and my car. He was having affairs with other women so he would leave at night. I would go back into the house and have a shower, bathe Libby, organise what little food we had and then go back to the car with her to get what little sleep I could manage.

My savings had gradually been depleted by my ex and he demanded I pay for everything. He even said to me, *"I'm going to keep taking every cent from you so you will never be able to leave, you stupid bitch!"*

Unfortunately, I was not followed up by a child health nurse after my daughter's birth and was not made aware of this service until she was several months old. I continued to feel very isolated and alone. This also affected my daughter's early development as I was not aware of 'tummy time' and other milestones that were expected. I missed out on months of engaging with other new, local mums.

The police finally took an order out against my ex when Libby was 3 months old.

When my daughter was six months, I sought the support of my one best friend. She rang me back with the solution: to speak to a Centrelink social worker and a domestic violence service who liaised with the rental agent, so I was finally able to secure my own rental unit. I had only one week's rent saved but a Centrelink emergency payment and a bond loan helped immensely. By the time I was able to move, Libby was 7 months.

I was also able to get Libby into day-care, only three days at one centre, until another was able to offer more. My ex would turn up at the day-care centres and the staff were fearful so wouldn't ask him to leave. His behaviour caused distress for Libby, so I continued to move day-care centres. I returned to contract administration roles. He had eroded my self-confidence, so I only returned to singing on a casual basis. After I had moved, my ex would drive by our rental and ring my phone at all hours of the day and night, leaving extremely abusive and threatening messages.

When my daughter was nine months old, my ex took her under the pretence of buying her some clothes. He later rang me and said, *"You're never seeing her again. And if you call the police, I will kill her."* I finally got her back after two hours. It was a ploy to get to me. There were many incidents of stalking and physical, emotional and verbal abuse that continued for three years after I left. I was too afraid to report these to the police, as I didn't fully know about "breaches of an order" and I was too scared he would take Libby again and harm her.

This is a de-identified vignette.

Since leaving, I have mainly focused on my daughter's safety and health. I worked whenever possible, but securing stable employment has been difficult for a number of reasons. Libby has some health issues that require various specialist appointments, tests and hospitalisations, and I am her sole carer. I also experience domestic violence-related insomnia and exhaustion. We have also had to move often and I am on constant alert due to the history of threats and behaviour by my ex, as well as the many difficulties and challenges of seeking protection through the justice system. Finances are also a constant stress.

Over the years I have seen a number of GPs, for both Libby and myself, for various reasons. Who we saw depended upon a number of factors including whether the practice bulk billed, after work hours availability, conflicting appointments or activities planned for my daughter, where we lived, if it was a female 'issue', etc.

I saw one GP, a year or so prior to my pregnancy, who indicated she wanted to call the police, however when I explained that my ex-partner had threatened to kill me if the police showed up again, she decided against it.

Throughout the time in my life when I was beaten and often ended up in hospital Accident and Emergency or at local GP surgeries, I felt judged and looked down upon. I experienced victim shaming and a lack of empathy, with no real pathways for help.

Since leaving my ex, I have taken a very active role in my recovery, engaging with counsellors, psychologists, my faith, many books and martial arts. I am passionate about research, prevention and 'cure' (I like to call it 'resolution'), as well as natural therapies and an extremely healthy lifestyle (unprocessed organic foods, no smoking or alcohol).

I still suffer with ongoing domestic violence related health problems. I have several musculoskeletal injuries, arthritis, memory loss and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Finding holistic care has been really difficult and remains a struggle. I have had to self-manage my healthcare. Other prominent domestic violence cases in the media bring up trauma for me so I hesitate watching the news. I've found quiet time amongst nature to be renewing and I'm looking into music therapy.

**Did you know...**

**MHPN has a series of webinars that cover a range of topical mental health issues.**

Visit [www.mhpn.org.au](http://www.mhpn.org.au) to learn more.

**Please note: to protect the identity of our lived experience panel member, a pseudonym has been used.**

This is a de-identified vignette.