

I am writing this brief, in anonymity, to tell my story as a survivor of domestic abuse. I am 49 years old. I come from a healthy and happy family. I am university educated and moved out on my own in my early 20s. When I met my abuser, I was in my early 30s. I had many friends, a successful career and owned my own place.

Looking back at the relationship, I now recognize that there were red flags. My first experience of abuse occurred 3 months into the marriage. I recall it being very jarring and thinking "what have I gotten myself into?" Looking back, I now see that his abuse was gradual and insidious aimed at getting control over me.

The first time my ex-husband raged was when my son was an infant. He went into a ballistic rage yelling at me repeatedly with my son just a few feet away. I was on parental leave and was sleep deprived breastfeeding. My ex was angry because I was "letting myself go" by wearing sweats around the house. He expected me to be intimate with him after the rage. During this sexual act, I remember being frightened and repulsed at the same time.

When he raged, his eyes would turn black with his face ashen. I would see the vein throbbing in his forehead. His arms would flail and his hands would be in fists. He stood with his feet wide apart. He shouted insults at me in his loudest voice with a posture like he was going to physically assault me. There were times when he slammed his fist hard or broke things. I have no doubt that these acts were designed to frighten and intimidate me. My children were present for the majority of the rages. He yelled at me in public among strangers. Yet to neighbours, friends, etc he was the wonderful husband and doting Dad. During his rages, I would be in a fight or flight state with my limbs numb and frozen, unable to move. When I tried to speak, it angered him more so I often kept quiet looking at the ground. At times I would feel nauseous.

Day to day life was extremely rigid and regimented. Everything had to be done his way to the smallest detail. He was very controlling with our finances where I had to account for every penny. He would go hours and days without speaking to me with the silent treatment. The abuse was physical intimidation, emotional/psychological abuse, spiritual abuse, sexual abuse (withholding affection, sex and intimacy) and financial abuse. I became almost totally isolated from family and friends because I knew he disapproved of me connecting with them. I was embarrassed to talk about it but more so that if I told people, it meant I had to do something about it when I was too afraid. He was too smart to hit or shove me because there would be outward signs of his abuse.

I recall near the end of my marriage laying in bed staring at the ceiling feeling like I was in the middle of a tornado. He had so many rules but the rules kept changing. He used the element of surprise to keep myself and the children off balance. We never saw his rages coming. At the same time, I would sense the tension building by just the way he held his head. The anticipation was almost unbearable and at times I wanted him to blow to "get it over with."

My ex's abuse toward my son started when he was 3. It started literally overnight when daughter was born. The abuse was escalating toward me. He was physical with my son often with no warning and always in a rage. When my son was aged 5-7 his abuse was escalating and the abuse toward my daughter as a toddler was starting. I don't feel comfortable describing this any further in writing but I have relayed all of this history to professionals involved in my case.

There is hardly any information available to the public about how abuse affects children developmentally. Both my children exhibit signs of developmental trauma. I haven't been able to get my children a psychological assessment or therapy because my ex-husband hasn't consented. Children who grow up in abusive homes can grow into adulthood with mental health issues, be more prone to drug addiction, self harm and suicide. This is all preventable with education on Domestic Violence (DV)/Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), trauma and attachment issues. Family court, court appointed professionals, CAS, police, doctors, psychologists, and the public DO NOT intervene in a manner that shows that they truly understand what DV/IPV and coercive control really is and how they should intervene to protect Mothers and children.

Mothers and children experiencing domestic violence compartmentalize. We don't "look" like victims because we can act "normal" in safe environments such as work or school. This is essential to survive. I left my abuser after an incident where he was physical with my son in a rage. Fortunately, my children and I were able to stay with my parents. I didn't hear from my ex-husband for an extended period of time. Once he was served with separation court papers, he made constant and persistent contact. He exhibited stalking behaviors wanting to reconcile. He tried to take the children under false pretenses and the police took his side without hesitation.

Once you separate from an abuser and you begin to take steps in the family court system, the survivor and the abuser are viewed as both being "high conflict." No one wants to get involved when custody litigation is occurring. A survivor can't get

therapy for her children or even go to the doctor unless the abuser consents. CAS keeps closing the file after giving a talking to the abuser to educate him on his parenting style. Then the abuser confronts the children so they become even more afraid to speak up. These professionals go out of their way to say the abuser is remorseful when he is anything but.

My abuser and I went through an S30 assessment. I documented numerous incidents of abuse and evidence for the social worker yet they left it out of their report and file notes. I don't understand how this is allowed but when we tried to challenge the assessment in court, I was penalized by the judge. The custody assessor recommended some things in my favour but they didn't acknowledge the abuse dynamics framing it as "high conflict."

This assessor recommended reunification therapy (RT). The RT therapists are social workers and in my experience, their main objective is to increase access for the abuser. They do not acknowledge domestic violence as an issue that impacts the children. The mindset is that once the parents are separated, the "conflict" is gone. My experience is that the abuser does not change and that the abuse continues toward the children.

From my experience, the latest trend with family court and court appointed professionals is to accuse the protective Mother of "parental alienation" even when there's a history of abuse. She is forced to encourage the children to have access with the Father or else she is accused of being uncooperative and is penalized. The children are re-victimized when they refuse or resist going to see the abusive parent and are forced to go anyway. If the Mother doesn't force them to go, which can involve physically making them go, she is accused of parental alienation. The RT that my family was involved with did not do a proper assessment. By the end of the first appointment, she refused to acknowledge the abuse saying "history is history and we're only looking forward." She wouldn't discuss my children's problematic behaviours and emotional turmoil. She set the goal of therapy to expand access. She told me that if the children came home upset from visitation because their Dad yelled, I was to tell the children to be assertive with their Dad and tell him how they feel and for me to "stay out of it." My children are terrified of their Father and there's no way they would be able to do this.

The family court, custody assessors and RT therapists are not educated in domestic violence or coercive control. Yet they have so much power making life altering decisions. As a survivor I have spent a gross amount of money to these so called "therapists" and assessors who do more harm to us survivors and our children. Many survivors like myself, also suffer financially post-separation at the hands of our abusers. The law says there's no statute of limitation to settle finances. My ex-husband took large sums of money out of our joint bank account immediately following separation and he refuses to settle the finances so that I can get some of my money out. The court won't do anything about this.

In your news release, there's a point that states, "explore strategies to prevent intimate partner violence and to educate survivors and perpetrators of violence." What about educating the public, family court, court appointed professionals, doctors, psychologists, CAS, police on DV/IPV and coercive control who should be providing support and making decisions to support victims? For the professionals, they should be forced to address this in their practices. Children are falling through the cracks!!!

Recommendations

- "Coercive control" should be taken just as seriously as physical violence. In my experience, no one takes emotional or psychological abuse seriously at all.
- Bill C233 ("Keira's Law") would be a step forward in helping survivors and children of DV/IPV from suffering these injustices and harmful decisions that impact their lives so negatively.
- The term "parental alienation" should NOT be allowed in family court. It's not even recognized by the World Health Organization yet it's rampant in family court.
- "Reunification therapy" should be banned. It is NOT therapy. It is bullying and all about refusing to acknowledge the survivor and child's experiences and legitimate refusal or reluctance for contact with the abuser.
- Survivors should have the ability to obtain a psychological assessment/therapy for their children, without the consent of their abusive partner. What are these abusers afraid of and why isn't family court taking this seriously?

Yours truly,

Anonymous survivor