

BRIEF ON INTIMATE PARTNER-DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

I have been in an abusive relationship for 19.5 years: three years of courtship, 14.5 years of marriage, two years and counting since my separation. The abuse is ongoing. My ex-husband continues to use our children as pawns to manipulate and abuse me. He uses the legal system to continue his coercive control over me by being uncooperative and conflictual. **There are no legal repercussions or consequences for this behaviour.** In doing so, he has dragged out the legal process causing me to incur huge legal bills, and forcing me to pay his share of joint expenses that he refuses to pay (property taxes on multiple properties, our child's orthodontics, property repairs and maintenance, etc.).

My relationship did not start off as abusive. I was swept off my feet with charm, flattery and immediate professions of love and devotion. I felt like I'd won the lottery, he seemed so perfect. Looking back, I can recognise the red flags in his behaviour that I now understand were predictors of abuse, but my cognitive dissonance led me to overlook them, and to come up with reasonable explanations for these inconsistencies.

The abuse began in earnest after we were married. It began gradually and subtly with devaluation, lies and gaslighting. He was always careful to maintain plausible deniability. Disparaging comments were "jokes", or I was just over-sensitive. His covert smear campaign against me began. I was painted as a shrew, while he painted himself as the victim. This served to gain supporters of his abusive behaviour, and to isolate me. As the years wore on, the abuse escalated and became more frequent. He was like Dr. Jekyll in public and Mr. Hyde behind closed doors. I was not allowed to question him, challenge him, or even express to him that he'd hurt my feelings, because if I did I would be attacked with verbal abuse and threats. I'd be sworn at, yelled at and called a "fucking bitch", and a "fucking cuntstick" until I was reduced to a sobbing heap on the ground. A wry smile often appeared on his face as he did this, as though it gave him pleasure to reduce me to nothing. He would then tell me with disgust in his voice, to "Pull [myself] together" or to "Stop crying." Turning on a dime, he would step out the door and immediately start laughing and joking with friends or neighbours, even inviting them over for drinks.

My ex-husband regularly borrowed thousands of dollars behind my back. He took out secret loans and secret credit cards. Time and time again, I drained my savings to pay back the money he'd borrowed. I thought I was being a supportive spouse who was doing my best to keep my family intact for the sake of our children. In 2008, my parents gave us \$40,000 to help with the cost of building our new house. My ex-husband used the money to pay off his car loan. When we converted our building loans into a conventional mortgage, I found out from our bank manager that my ex-husband had borrowed \$155,000 in joint funds without my knowledge or consent. In 2019, my ex-husband took \$40,000 from our joint line of credit, and took out a high interest loan to buy a \$140,000 RV without my knowledge or consent.

All of these things my ex-husband was permitted to do - because we were married. If we had not been married, I would have called the police when he became verbally abusive and threatening - because they would have done something. If we had not been married, I may have had some legal recourse for the hundreds of thousands of dollars he has stolen from me. On December 11, 2019 I left my marriage once and for all. My ex-husband's behaviour was particularly erratic. He became aggressive, verbally abusive and threatened to break the glass in our front door if I did not let him in. He loitered outside the locked door of our family home for six hours. I was terrified, and trapped inside the house as he waited outside. Hesitantly, I finally

called the non-emergency number for the police. When I explained my situation to the woman who answered the phone, she was dismissive and made me feel like I was overreacting. As a result, I hung up the phone before I was connected to an officer. My ex-husband would end up stalking me, as our children and I drove 24 hours to embark on a cruise.

I frequently told my ex-husband that I wished he *would* hit me, so people could see what was going on behind closed doors. And yet, I had no idea I was in an abusive relationship.

Education

Educating the public about this kind of abuse is critical. The public needs to be able to recognise and understand that not all abuse is physical. People need to have an understanding of the patterns of abuse, and to be able to recognise the subtle forms of abuse and control, such as gaslighting, devaluation, and lying. Identifying my ex-husband's behaviour as abusive was precisely the explanation I needed to make sense of his paradoxical behaviour, and to eliminate the years of cognitive dissonance I struggled with. If only I had known.

Perhaps one of the most difficult things for me has been finding the language to describe what happened to me. I have immersed myself in learning about Narcissistic abuse, and am amazed at how consistent the behaviours are - as though these people are all given the same script to follow. How can a woman report abuse if they don't know that it is abuse? And how can a woman explain her experience of being abused without the language to describe what is happening to her?

Criminalization of Coercive and Manipulative Behaviours

I think that proving coercive and manipulative behaviours is a difficult, but not impossible task. I think that enforcing laws against these behaviours will be a difficult task. But I think criminalising these kinds of abusive behaviours is a step in the right direction. It validates the experience of abused women, and helps to bring awareness of this kind of abuse into the public eye.

Factors Preventing Women From Leaving Abusive Relationships

In many of these relationships, women have limited access to money and fear not being able to provide for their children. Even women like myself, who earn a decent income are forced into financial hardship by mounting legal fees and further financial abuse post-separation. There need to be repercussions for spouses who are uncooperative, conflictual, harassing, and use the legal system to continue their manipulations and abuse.

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