

Chris' Story

I never expected to become a victim of domestic abuse. To this day, Part of me still struggles to connect with labels; domestic abuse, abduction, assault, attempted murder, survivor, victim, PTSD.

Labels can be both limiting and overwhelming and like many men, I thought it was something that happened to other people. The perverse thing is that when it began to happen to me, I thought I was the only one. Although this is a story of hardship and one of unbearable pain, it is written in the hope that it shows silent suffering only exacerbates loneliness and that there is always help and hope available to all.

I wasn't perfect. I argued when I shouldn't have, I became frustrated too easily, I dug my heels in where I perhaps shouldn't have. Acknowledging our own shortcomings is important, but what is more important is sharing the brutal reality of what I lived through.

Just like so many of these stories, things at the start seemed normal enough. I ought to preface my story with the admission that I did not have the easiest of childhoods, having grown up isolated as the son of parents who warred emotionally, as well as physically.

I grew up very lonely and isolated with parents always at each other's throats verbally and physically, and periods of homelessness or living in cars. Other than online "girlfriends", I had no serious romantic interactions.

Things changed once I arrived at university. I met someone who asked me one day if I knew anything about laptops and if I could help. This socially isolated nerd was starstruck by the attention. She appeared caring, affectionate and attentive; although she didn't really understand me, she accepted me as I was, all baggage included. I didn't realise for a long time that she was slowly isolating me from family and friends, eroding my support network until I had no-one else left.

Fast forward a bit, and we got married and had our first child. A beautiful baby girl. In the lead up to this happy time was a realisation I had let pass me by my wife had isolated me to the point of distancing me from my friends and family and having no support network at all.

That's when the hatred started: anger, shouting, insults, pushing, belittling and using my past against me. She knew how to upset me - I didn't drink at the time, but was repeatedly compared to my physically abusive, alcoholic father, the man who as a child I was forced to watch rape my mother while I was told not to call the police as it was just a "joke". These comparisons were soul-destroying, but my Catholic guilt told me I must be the problem. After all, why would someone I had given vows to betray me so badly?

I was constantly on edge, unable to identify why. I worked hard enough to support three people because she refused to work, with 4am daily starts, working multiple jobs across seven days a week. I did everything I could to keep the peace, and the demands, but it was never enough. Spending money we didn't have, doing almost all domestic work on top of actual jobs, always cooking dinner, cleaning the giant mess when I got home, being a present father, doing bedtime. Nothing I did kept the peace. Any attempts to communicate how hard I found it were met with derision, being told that if I were a "real man" like men from her home country, she wouldn't have to hear me complaining.

She began having medical issues and refused NHS treatment in favour of travelling "home" for appointments. She is taking trips constantly back to her native country, on top of talking to her family in her language on Skype every single night. I was always shut out, always isolated. Under pressure, we were encouraged by a doctor in her country to have another baby, who said that due to her health issues, the time was now or never. We soon had a beautiful baby boy, and shortly after my wife informed me, she'd undergone surgery to remove both ovaries.

The issues became more extreme. There was impulsive crying, silent treatment, throwing things at me, telling me that I was stupid and uneducated, telling me that my hopes and dreams were pointless because I should just go to work and not complain, like a "normal man".

Then, I experienced something that's still hard to comprehend. I was poisoned. Despite being in severe pain, she refused to take me to the hospital despite her being a native. I didn't want to believe that it could be deliberate, but deep down I knew something was very wrong. Years later, after several investigations by the NHS and help from some

brilliant doctors, I now know what happened and that the unfortunate truth is my suspicions had been right. She tried to get rid of me. To murder me.

I was in her home country, and despite me being in severe pain, she refused to get me medical help. I didn't want to believe it could have been a deliberate act, but years later following extensive medical investigation under UK doctors, it is clear that what happened to me was wilful poisoning. It didn't work, I'm still here, but now I have long and deep scars across my abdomen. It makes taking my t-shirt off, even in front of a partner, difficult. It left physical marks and lasting effects that I still live with today. It's a constant reminder that the person I vowed to love for better or worse took my better and only gave me the worst. Life went on, and things only became worse.

Incredibly, things got worse. I wasn't allowed to see friends and certainly couldn't have female friends. The physical abuse escalated. I had a rolling pin smashed on my knuckles, I was pushed, I had doors slammed in my face, and years later I still have a slight but visible difference on the left side of my head from where I was hit with a heavy laptop.

I kept going for the sake of the children, and she kept going back to her country for further extended visits (which I much later learnt had something to do with a budding emotional relationship with someone else). On a Sunday seven years ago, when I was in Britain and my family abroad, I received a call from my wife that explained she wasn't coming back, the children were staying with her, that this had been the plan all along.

My "choice" was to relocate with her or never see the children again. That was in 2017. I have seen my children once since. I received divorce paperwork mere days after her phone call, meaning the process had already started before I was informed.

The flat fell deathly silent without my children saying hello to Daddy every night. A colleague who had noticed bruises on my face months earlier, now noticed something was wrong and came to stay with me. We remained best friend until he passed away two years later. I will always be grateful.

I became “free and single”, missing my babies and robbed of the stereotypically Disney happy ever after / “girly” dream of marriage and family which had always also been my dream.

For a few years I was lost, constantly receiving hateful and threatening messages from abroad. I dated someone for a couple of years, which started well but ended the same way my previous relationship had. I turned to drink to the extent that I don't remember half of one year nor the next. The drinking didn't stop, and it fell into cocaine as it was readily available in the ‘professional social night life’, and things got worse.

My work colleagues and remaining friends railed round and I started to receive professional help.

Since then, I have lost 20kg (3 stone), I go to the gym weekly, I solidified my friendship circle and have cut away the toxic people from my life, I'm building my own business, I have hobbies, I'm starting to sleep more than 5 hours a night without night terrors for the first time in my life.

I am still fighting to see my kids so they know I exist – and I am confident of winning. I am finally accepting of the fact that I was lied to, knowing now that my former wife has a third child, despite telling me that she had had her ovaries removed years earlier.

Recovery has been slow, and I would be lying if I said I was happy, but I can say I'm better. I'm healthier, stronger and more content than I have been at any point in my life. I've learnt to talk about what happened without shame.. I deal with flashbacks, certain triggers, and physical reminders of what was done to me. The difference now is that I no longer live in fear. For a long time, I struggled to call it “abuse” because it didn't fit the image that I had in my head of what victims looked like.

But men can be victims too, and it's important that we say that out loud. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that silence helps no one. Trust me, I know it feels hopeless sometimes. There are charities that help women escape abuse, and others that help men change their behaviour, but few that support male victims.

It feels no one cares about men, and that if we just died tomorrow, who would even notice? Well, if you're reading this, I know. I would notice. So, if you're a man going through abuse, please don't let fear or shame

stop you from asking for help. What's happening to you is not your fault. There is a life beyond it, and I promise it's a life worth living. You will get there; all you need to do is believe that you deserve better.