

Alice #24

The Day I realised I Was in an Abusive Relationship

I can recall vividly the moment I realised I was in an abusive relationship. An argument had ensued, for what reason I do not know, but what I do know is this was just the beginning. At the time, I did not know what frightened me more: the altercation, the clarification of events, or the realisation that this was actually happening to me.

I was tertiary educated and this was not supposed to happen to me. I should know to leave - but I could not. An argument had ensued in our bedroom. My ex-husband is over 6 feet tall and I am just over 5 feet on a good day. I can remember being berated over something I had done wrong. My ex-husband had cornered me in the bedroom between the bed and built in cupboards and I couldn't get out. I had never seen him this angry before and he was extremely intimidating and frightening. I can remember thinking that I just had to agree to what he was saying and somehow get myself out of the bedroom. I am not sure how I managed to get passed him, but I was able to make my way to the car downstairs. I had placed the car in reverse and looked into the revision mirror to see my ex husband standing behind me screaming and bashing the boot of the car. I couldn't move. I was worried the neighbours would hear so I stopped the car and sat there crying whilst he screamed at me. He walked away and I continued crying. We had just bought our first house, I had an eight year old child from a previous relationship and we had two infants aged five months and almost two years respectively.

While I was sitting in the car, it dawned on me that I was in an abusive relationship and that I did not know what I was going to do. My ex-husband is an extremely intelligent, attractive, charismatic, charming man. He would be the life of the party and people were drawn to him. He was able to put on the perfect show, regardless of the fact he may have just had me cowering in the corner, five minutes prior to guests arriving for dinner. We were able to pull it all together and act like the perfect little family. I was too scared not too.

The systematic psychological, verbal, emotional, sexual and eventual financial abuse slowly and surely wears you down. You don't even realise it at the time but all of a sudden you become an anxious-ridden version of your former self. My ex-husband had what he called the "48 hour rule", in which he would not go any longer than 48 hours without having sex. It didn't matter if I had silent tears streaming down my face, felt sick, or a child was crying in the next room. Sex became another thing that I had to do regardless if I wanted to or not, the repercussions of not complying weren't worth it.

Any time I tried to do something for myself, my ex-husband would act out. If I wanted to return to study or to work I would be accused of not supporting him. I was told in no uncertain terms that my career would never be as important as his and he was allowed to go out if he wanted to, as he deserved it. I would be able to study when the girls were asleep and surely public health isn't that hard anyhow. I mean it isn't surgery now is it? He would retaliate by going out and not coming home, by not helping me at all with the children, by being angry if the house was not clean enough, dinner not on the table or the fridge not set out how it should be. I was given a "fridge tute" one evening so I had no excuses for not putting the correct items on the right shelving. If the butter accidentally ended up on the third shelf as opposed to the first, I was purposely trying to annoy him. I was made to stand there and repeat what items went on what shelf and you just did it. I would get in trouble for not packing the dishwasher efficiently and he would re-do it as I obviously wasn't capable.

I was constantly being told that I could do with losing five kilos, having a breast augmentation and a mandibular osteotomy wouldn't go astray on my slightly depressed chin. It was not uncommon that when we went to bed, for my ex to lecture me for up to three hours on what I had done wrong recently and for me to have to reiterate the issue so I understood exactly what I had done wrong to ensure it didn't happen again. It got to a point that I would try to sneak off to bed early to try to avoid the confrontation.

My ex-husband is a pathological liar. His drinking and drug-taking behaviours would fluctuate between what could be deemed socially acceptable and what would be classified as out of control addictive behaviours. These, of course, were all my fault as I caused him too much stress. If I just did what I was told, then he wouldn't have to drink or use drugs, and besides, I was just paranoid - the same way as his first wife was. The same way I was paranoid about his flirting with other women. The same way I questioned why a female work acquaintance would be calling him on a Sunday night, the same way I would ask why a strange woman had text him asking why he hadn't called and the same way I was adamant he was having an affair with my friend. I could see things happening in front of my very eyes. His actions and words spoke two completely different stories.

I was being made to question my own intellect and intuition and eventually it wore me down. The only thing I knew that was certain, is that while I stayed I was able to protect my children by bearing the brunt of his aggression. I could shield them from it and deflect a situation that I thought may arise. However, I was constantly walking on egg shells to gauge his mood when he walked in the door.

As far as I am aware, my ex had three affairs. I believe there could have been many more. The first one was a one night stand, the second a short lived affair with a woman we both worked with and the final one, an eight month affair with a friend of mine with whom he now lives. The first two times, there were tears, begging for forgiveness and the exact words I wanted to hear. We even moved interstate after his second affair to get away from the supposed stressors and behaviours that made him do it. Nothing changed. If anything it made him worse as there was no one besides me to hold him accountable for his actions.

I was now isolated from my support network both personally and professionally. My ex-husband had asked me not to tell anyone in our new home town of his previous affair as he was ashamed and he wanted to start afresh. I only ever told one woman. The woman he is now living with. When I finally found concrete evidence of my then husbands affair with my friend, I told him to leave despite the threat I'd only received the week before - that if I ever left him he would make sure I had no money and that I would hardly see the kids. However, I could not do it anymore. This is when the campaign truly started. Who on earth ever says no to a surgeon - he was beyond livid. I needed my life back. I needed me back.

It was on the third occasion, the previous year when my ex had been physically violent with me, that I sought help. I had been in counselling for five months at this time devising strategies as to how I was going to leave when I discovered his affair. This was my out and I could not wait any longer. I had wanted to try to see the year out as my eldest child was in year 12 and I had not wanted the year to be any more disruptive or stressful than what it needed to be. Our nine year old said to me when I informed him that his dad would not be living with us any more "well at least you aren't going to get yelled at any more mummy".

My ex-husband was true to his word. The smear campaign against me was and still is in full force. He froze our bank accounts and cancelled my credit cards the day of separation. He opened a new account that I was unable to access. He left me with a credit card that had its limit reduced to one quarter of its previous worth that I would have to beg to ask to be paid off so I could feed our children. He launched legal proceedings against me for 50/50 access of our children within one month of our separation in which he expected the children to move into an immediate blended shared care family environment with our former family friend, the mother of three daughters (whom I had regularly babysat). He would blatantly lie in legal documentation and without any evidence of the contrary I could not dispute it. He was able to twist and turn events to suit his own agenda. It took 18 months before my legal team truly believed my story. My barrister on the other hand immediately saw this was a clear case of abuse and it should never have been able to happen. As the law currently stands, there is nothing to prevent it. Family law is fundamentally flawed. The abuser is still able to abuse within the legal arena as they have all of the power and control.

My ex has an extremely high disposable income which he used on whatever it took to destroy me and leave me penniless for "kicking him out". He did not care. I have now been court-ordered to sell our family home whilst my ex moves his new partner, her three children and two of our children, in one of the state's most exclusive riverside suburbs. We were highly leveraged and with the housing downturn, I will be rendered homeless and our children face a future of financial uncertainty with me. I currently do not have a job and nor do I have any savings to help buffer the transition. My ex is hoping our children enjoy life with him more, however he has underestimated our children too. My eldest who knew him as a father figure but now refuses to talk to him and our youngest is well aware of the difference between a supportive environment and one filled with materialistic possessions and empty promises.

I am slowly rebuilding. My self-esteem, confidence and self-worth was eroded. I am still struggling with body dysmorphia and insecurities however this is something I will not let happen to me ever again. I have surrounded myself with people who I know are there for me. They believe me when I tell them of my ex-husband's abuse - they are able to see the real me. I am now able to know and trust in my own truth.

When you are living this life, it is truly like you are existing in a fog. You place one foot in front of the other and get through the day. You block things out as a survival mechanism and convince yourself it isn't really that bad. It will get better because of A B or C. It doesn't. I have learnt that it was not my fault. Our relationship may not have worked but I did not deserve to be treated this way. I have learnt to be honest with myself and my relationships with other people. Most importantly, I have learnt to be kind to myself. Nourishing one's own

soul and allowing time to grieve is the only way to heal. The old adage does run true, that with time it gets easier.

Day by day, I will get stronger and we will be ok.
