

Alice #80

I am 80 years old. My psychologist suggested that I submit my abusive husband story as doing so may have a cathartic effect on me. I struggle with the fact that I have not been able to fully move past it, even though I divorced him more than 50 years ago and he died some years later.

We dated for three years and then got married. People that we knew thought he was fun and his friends were nice. He started hitting me on our first wedding anniversary. I discovered later that he would hit me whenever he came home from being out with his girlfriends or when he was unhappy for any reason. He used his hands, other objects and the butt of his pistol. Apparently I made him feel guilty, although I never commented on his dalliances.

The first time he frightened me was leaving a friend's house, he became angry because I needed to breast feed our child. Our friends offered to lend me a shawl to put over me so that I would not embarrass my husband by exposing my breast. He responded by going out and getting in the car – screamed for me to get in the car. I did so (no seat belts in those days) and he shot off before I could close the door. He drove wildly, swerving up the street with me holding the baby and I was sure we were going to fall out. Our friends chased us in their car, finally making us stop. The friend asked me if I would like a ride home with them – I would have, but was too frightened of my husband to say yes. The friends told him that they would not tolerate such reckless driving...my husband just laughed, made me get in and drove (more sedately) home.

Once he threw me down the outside stairs and the neighbor (male) threatened him. Husband thought it was funny (it wasn't). I responded to another slap by hitting him with the saucepan and told him to never hit me again. He just laughed (he was big and I was little, so I was unable to physically harm him or protect myself).

In many ways I felt like a prisoner in my own home. He would never allow me to have a key to the house and locked the front door on his way out. Only way out was back door and over the fence. Had I gone out without being able to lock up the house he would have punished me. Most of the money he earned was spent on others (girlfriends and their families); we had almost no money for food and clothing. I did cake decorating to feed and clothe us. He amused himself once by dropping his pistol onto completed cakes (I had to redo them before the next morning, so worked into the night). In order to earn enough I generally worked from 6am – 2am.

He often came home late, and as I was frightened of him, I slept on the living room couch - the punishment was worse if I was in the bedroom. One night his came home and held his revolver to my head and pulled the trigger, then laughed when it did not fire. This was the first of many 'russian roulette' experiences...and I began to have trouble sleeping.

The worst physical damage he did to me was when I was holding my second child and he knocked me out, (I do not know how the baby survived). He put me in bed and began cleaning up the blood off the carpet (using hot water which set the stain) and told me not to come out as my face would scare the girls. The damage resulted in me having to go to hospital with a broken nose, split lip and a herniated disk. Too make it worse, the doctor decided to do an internal exam to check for sexual assault – two nurses had to hold me down. The internal exam was unnecessary as there were no laws preventing rape in marriage, I suspect that the doctor had his own problems and I was another helpless target. I was more traumatized by the internal exam, than by my husband hitting me.

My father took me to the local police station to report the damage to my face and back. The police officer looked at me and said "so, you have had a lover's tiff eh". My father grabbed him by the shirt and shouted for another policeman to come. This behavior was typical for the time. I went to the local shop and a couple of women were there and asked me what had happened to my face. I told them that "my old man decked me". They laughed in disbelief. Later the shopkeeper told me that they had asked her later what had happened (she guessed correctly). The women were horrified, but never spoke to me again.

Several of my close friends knew. They believed what I told them, asked what they could do and cried with me. Others cruelly asked me "what did you do to make him do that to you?" Some of the neighbors knew what happened to me (regularly), but did not know what to do...so did nothing. However, the green grocer knew and later apologised to me for doing nothing. In my mind, I thought that it was up to me to do something, but I did not know what.

My husband never broke my confidence. I was determined not to be a battered wife. My local doctor said that I should not let him see my fear, I followed that advice, but I began to have a fear of crowded places (struggled to go into the butcher's shop – so I would phone them and go down and stand outside and they brought it out to me).

Twelve months after the hospital visit, I tried to get my husband to treat our daughters well in the hope that it would calm him down and cause him to treat us all better. He took us on a picnic, at my urging, and as we drove out into the country he commented "I wonder how many people are murdered out here and no one ever finds them". He dropped us for the picnic and went to see one of his girlfriends. The girls were really scared being in the forest after dark, but he had accidentally left his cigarette lighter, so we used it to play games, look at rocks and other interesting things. He returned long after dark to take us home.

One day he decided to take the girls to see the snow, but they were both in bed with high temperatures from measles. I said no and he went off to take his current girlfriend and her kids to see it. He came home later for lunch as if nothing had happened.

With the constant beatings and psychological torture, I really needed someone to talk to, so I spoke to our church minister who said "You cannot stay with the man, but we do not believe in divorce. It is better to come from a broken home than live in one". So, I began to call Lifeline regularly. The counsellors were wonderful and soon formed a support group for me (they asked me first). This way I did not have to continually repeat my story as whoever I spoke to knew about it. I remember telling them that I used to lie in bed waiting to hear a car pulling up...expecting it to be the police arriving to tell me that my husband was dead, and how guilty I felt about thinking that.

My conversations with the Lifeline counsellors continued. As they began to realise that I was trapped in a dangerous situation, they banded together to find a lawyer that they knew might help. I spoke to him and he began to look for a way for me to divorce my husband. Back then there was nothing like a 'No Fault' divorces. However, there was a hospital report of my injuries and this ultimately meant that I could divorce my husband for Assault and Battery.

Soon after the divorce I began to save money and replaced the furniture that we had had together. The house looked and felt different. Some of the neighbors criticized me for getting a divorce, but I focused on surviving it all without being bitter and twisted. The things that really helped me were my faith, friends that believed and the wonderful Lifeline counsellors. I carry the memories and find that I struggle to show my feelings. I spent so many years hiding them that I find it hard to express them, even to those that I love. I hope that telling my story will be cathartic to me and those that read it.

PS. Alice #80 has reported that telling her story has made her feel much better.
