

Family and domestic violence is caused by an imbalance of power within relationships, where someone exercises their perceived power over another. In my case, my ex-partner used emotional manipulation to develop his power over me, and it caused me to question my sanity and reality. I honestly believe that forms of therapy, such as group or individual counselling, are helpful in changing people's perspectives on what constitutes family and domestic violence, but it is most beneficial when it is taught from a young age, so then children become strong individuals who can recognise and prevent power imbalances from occurring in public, and hopefully in private situations too.

My ex-partner never perceived that he may have been part of the problem in our relationship – everything was always someone else's fault. His previous relationship failed because his partner had cheated on him. His relationship with his mother was stressful because she was an alcoholic. His addiction to alcohol and gambling was because I didn't do enough to maintain an attractive figure and he had to gain satisfaction from other stimulants. He never took a moment to think reflectively and wonder what his contributions to each of the situations were. And many that perpetrate acts of family, domestic and sexual violence do not have the capacity to think about how their actions impact upon others, because they are simply thinking of themselves and placing the blame elsewhere.

I am an educated and intelligent person, with a Bachelor's degree, Diploma, and Certificates, and consider myself to be very perceptive. I was completely aware that my ex-partner's behaviour was extremely degrading and disrespectful towards me, but I stayed, partly because I was so starved of love and affection, and because he always knew exactly what to say to convince me that it would improve. The periods of silent treatment would last for days, I would be forced out of my bed to stay on the couch in my house, and I would shield my children from what was occurring because I did not want anyone to see just how broken my life was. I became so physically stressed that I often felt like I couldn't breathe, because I knew that, at any moment, anything could set him off, and I would be in a world of unpredictability, questioning my actions and if I had contributed to the mood switch in any way. I was forced to perform sexual acts on his terms and his terms only; I was not allowed to initiate it, because in his eyes, I was not desirable unless it was instigated by him.

I was controlled in so many ways, including the absolute minutiae of tasks – I could not towel dry my hair and was only allowed to use a certain hairbrush, because the others would fluff my hair too much in his opinion. I was not allowed to eat with a splayd fork, because in his opinion, only children ate with those. I was told what I could wear, what and how often I could eat, and how I could parent my children. I was not allowed to hug other men, even in my family, because he believed that would indicate some sort of sexual relationship with them. I was criticised for my driving skills, my taste in music and television, and my fashion sense. What was acceptable one day was often ridiculed the next, so I never knew where I stood in terms of his approval. It took him over two and a half years before he told me that he loved me, and he knew how much power that had over me.

I was trapped in the relationship for four and a half years, and it took me three months of planning to leave. I had tried to leave three times, and I made the decision to report him to the police during the second time, as he had made a physical threat that impacted my sense of safety. After a disagreement about how late I had stayed out at a [REDACTED] celebration with our neighbours, my ex-partner took [REDACTED] knives and [REDACTED].

I spent the night at my parents' place and reported the incident to police the next day. I was terrified, but after a few days, he convinced me that he did not ever intend to hurt me, and I was love-bombed to ensure I returned to the relationship. During that week, I walked out to our letterbox, and was horrified to discover an envelope with the police station's logo on the front, sitting inside my letterbox. Inside was a copy of the police report I had made, addressed to me. I hate to think of what might have

happened, had my ex-partner been the one to check the letterbox that day, because I had to share ALL information with him.

I had limited freedom when I was in the relationship, and any time I had away from the house was monitored by him. I had to phone him as soon as I finished work, and spent the drives home talking to him until I pulled into the driveway. This meant that I could not go anywhere to research how to leave effectively, and find information on what supports were available locally. I was fortunate that my parents were able to do a lot of this research on my behalf, and I was allowed to visit them once a week with my children. Even so, I still had no knowledge that my local children's centre was an ideal place for me to start in terms of gathering information on supports that would be available locally, because my main priority was ensuring the emotional safety of my children following the split. I was under the belief that because my children were not enrolled in the programs offered at the children's centre, that I would not be able to access any support there – and I had no knowledge that children's centres actually have that sort of information available to people trying to escape domestic violence. It would be an ideal place to advertise more widely as a haven for information, because people can go there under the ruse of being there for their children, instead of seeking information on family and domestic violence supports.

I strongly believe that if coercive control was a criminal offence in South Australia, I would have had the strength to leave my situation a lot earlier, with the knowledge that I was being victimised in the eyes of the law. The public's perception of coercive control is often one of victim-blaming, because it is assumed that you should have known better to leave, or disbelief that you would consider staying in such conditions. This is an absolutely dated and horrendous way of thinking, because we do not tend to blame other victims of crime for their presence within an incident. Had the public and legal perception been one of increased understanding and support, I would have felt justified in standing up for myself and fighting for my rights – but when it isn't considered to be a crime, then how can you justify why it is wrong not only to yourself, but to the perpetrator too?

Thank you for reading my submission.