

"Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor Hell a fury like a woman scorned"

William Congreve, 'The Mourning Bride' (1697)

PROLOGUE

Can you identify domestic abuse?

As an outsider, it might be easier to identify as you could exercise some level of objectivity. However, as a person going through domestic abuse, might you be able to do the same? Are you certain? And say that you were able to identify domestic abuse as a victim of abuse, wouldn't it be ideal if you could get out as safely as you can? What does a victim strategically leaving her abuser look like?

The legal system protects the identification of abusers under the guise of the laws of libel and defamation. Victims of abuse need to present persons who have witnessed the actual abuse taking place. These are not hypothetical scenarios. So what did I do? I played the long game and outsmarted my abuser. I'm unable to name him for the reasons mentioned above, but this man is out there in the world. Paying taxes and taking public transport, just like you and I. And he'll do the same thing to another woman, again. I'm quite convinced of it.

Why? Because I was always the problem, he wasn't. I could never be good enough, smart enough, strong enough, talented enough and woman enough for him. The abuser is keen to place blame on others, and very rarely themselves. It's a narcissistic trait.

I can't make him pay for what he did to me, but what I can do is arm women with knowledge so that they can outsmart their abusers. And if their egos get bruised in the process then well, that's just icing on the cake.

We are on the back-foot because of patriarchy which has seeped its way into institutions including state and religion. If the system is stacked against us because of the mere fact that

we are women then surely there must be a way for us to address this unfairness? And so, this book was born.

This book presents an eight-step guide for victims of abuse, to help them leave their abuser by employing strategy. I give you the permission to steal, lie, deceive and be duplicitous. Why? Because the circumstances deem it necessary. This is not the playbook for the scorned wife who's been cheated on. This book is for the women who feels that she can't leave a relationship safely, fearing that there will be physical consequences.

What is the eight-step guide?

I would never encourage any woman to remain in an abusive relationship where her physical, emotional and mental well-being are being direly jeopardised to a point where not only her life is at stake, but the very essence of her being. All the strategy in the world can't make up for the fact that you foresee your abuser murdering you in your sleep, tonight. If you are in immediate danger, there's no long game to play. You must get out now. The eight-step guide might help you get out, but staying silent and waiting in the wings for the right time is not the safest course of action if this applies to you.

If you don't fall into this category, then read on.

The first stage is being able to identify domestic abuse. This step not only applies to those women who are currently in abusive relationships, but to that sixteen-year-old impressionable girl who is embarking on her first relationship with a man and feels like something is wrong, but she can't put her finger on it. Why is he invalidating my views? Why is he so possessive when it comes to me spending time with my male friends? Why does he randomly show up at my house unannounced to check up on me? This guide acts as a preventative tool to help those who haven't encountered abuse yet, to help them identify it as such, and get out.

Only once a woman can put her finger on the pulse-point and internally come to terms with abuse, can she start plotting her exit.

Domestic abuse against women doesn't take place in a vacuum. Women (unlike men) have patriarchy to contend with. This is why women being strategic, evens out the odds stacked against them.

We normally encounter problematic comments when we as women are interacting with the opposite sex. Some women would consider such comments by men to be warning signs, and potentially "narcissistic" or "controlling". Those who are discerning, walk away from the outset because they have a strong sense of what they can and can't put up with. But some women brush these comments aside and stay. Minor instances of disrespect often culminate into much worse types of abuse in the future. If we think about human nature, if a recipient of abuse doesn't stand up for themselves, then of course the perpetrator will persist until they get their way.

Some may think this line of thinking is farfetched. However, enduring controlling comments from the beginning of a relationship took me many years to realise that what was happening to me was abusive. There were always signs. I just ignored them.

I can't emphasise the importance of opening discussions with women on domestic abuse. When we think of domestic abuse, the first thing that immediately comes to mind is physical abuse. What most don't realise, is that there are very often indicators that a person may have the propensity to be abusive. There are several common themes - disrespect, control, exploitation, manipulation and gaslighting, amongst others.

It's one thing facing abuse and understanding what it is and confronting it, versus not understanding what it is and living with the status quo. Once we educate ourselves on the concept of domestic abuse from an early age, it is only then we can spot problematic behaviour.

Once you've come to terms with the fact that you're a victim of abuse, the next stage is getting out. This book isn't targeted towards one type of woman. You don't have to be educated to apply this guide, or even have financial resources. You just need to understand the power of your own silence and appearing to keep the status quo, whilst you get your ducks in a row and plan your exit. The operational word is "appearing". He can never know what you are up to.

The final key step is the post-care around what you've done. Ok he's out of your house, what now? You're at the most vulnerable, and you need to keep your wits about you. It's not over yet, and this guide will take you through some of the things you need to be mindful of.

Therapy forms an essential part of this. Why? Because you have had to suppress your emotions and conjure up an extraordinary amount of resilience to enact this plan. You will need therapy, for at least the first few years. Date multiple people, do what you gotta do to get over your abuser, but stay in therapy.

What does patriarchy have to do with it?

The statistics are shocking.

Did you know that 1 in 4 women in England and Wales will experience domestic abuse in her lifetime¹? That is not a small number.

A study estimates nearly 75% of female survivors from inter-partner violence may have sustained one or more brain traumas². What this means is that women are not only having to deal with the emotional ramifications of domestic abuse, but physical as well.

¹ Domestic abuse statistics from Refuge UK.

² Brain Injury and Mental Health Among the Victims of Intimate Partner Violence: A Case-Series Exploratory Study by Gunnur Karakurt, Kathleen Whiting, Stephen E. Jones, Mark J. Lowe, and Stephen M. Rao.

The police receive a domestic abuse-related call every 30 seconds³. And these are just the reported cases, it is estimated that less than 24% of domestic abuse crime is reported to the police⁴.

It takes on average, 7 attempts before a woman leaves for good⁵. That means giving the perpetrator seven times to plan the different ways they can abuse their victim, one of which may involve killing her.

My perspective in this book is coming from the position of domestic violence being gendered. Gender is woven throughout domestic violence, especially given that the scale tips more towards domestic violence against women (versus men) in terms of seriousness. Women report more injurious violence when compared to men⁶.

The reality is that we live in a patriarchal society, and it simply isn't not good enough to address inequalities in the public sphere like the workplace, we need to address the inequalities that take place in the home as well in order for women to live to their fullest potential, both inside and outside the home.

Targeting those who are vulnerable, most often women, is the easiest way for men to exert power and control. For every three victims, two are female and one is male⁷. This book is directed towards women, not just because of the statistics and because I am a woman, but because through this book I am seeking to address institutionalised patriarchal power structures through relatable stories. I'm not seeking to invalidate the experiences of heterosexual men, as they too can fall victim to domestic abuse. However heterosexual men don't need to grapple with patriarchy, women do.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Domestic abuse statistics from NCDV.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/21542/1/Untangling%20the%20concept%20of%20coercive%20control.pdf>

⁷ Domestic abuse statistics from NCDV.

This wasn't an easy book to write.

There are women reading this book who might already be in a volatile situation, which risks endangering them further. They might be at the very beginning stages where there are themes of control but there's nothing seismic enough has kicked off (at least not yet). However, there are others at the tail-end of it where their abuser controls their phone, who you see daily, where you go and what you do.

Domestic abuse isn't like other crimes. You don't have to be walking down a dark alleyway past midnight and find yourself suddenly held at gunpoint. "Private violence" that takes place inside the home where there are very often no witnesses and is unrelated to other types of violence that we would witness in society such as armed robbery. Is the fact that we can't see it make it any less violent? The person who is abusing you claims to love and protect you. It is the worst kind of an abuse of trust.

Coming to terms with the fact that you are a victim of abuse is the first step, the next is getting out. But who is impacted by domestic abuse other than its victims? There is a social cost. In the United Kingdom, the social and economic costs of domestic abuse are estimated to be in the region of 78 billion pounds⁸.

Society often tells us that children must have a father, and that striving to create a suitable home for raising children is what everyone needs to aspire towards. We have advertisements selling these lifestyles to us, but when has there ever been a marketing slogan or a hallmark card written for single moms? Does anybody look to the implications of raising children in a home where one adult abusing another cancels out the concept of stability that a home is supposed to create? And if women leave an abusive relationship, what are the implications

⁸ Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Report: "A Patchwork of Provision: how to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales" - Government Response March 2023.

for her children? Exposure to domestic violence in childhood has been linked to low self-esteem, social withdrawal, depression, and anxiety⁹. And so, the vicious cycle continues.

Domestic abuse against women doesn't take place in a vacuum. Women (unlike men) have patriarchy to contend with. This is why women being strategic, evens out the odds stacked against them.

So why do we put up with this sh*t?

We sometimes make all kinds of excuses for our abuser. Perhaps we love them. We can't imagine our life without them. We have been indoctrinated into thinking that we need to make our marriage work. We have emotionally invested in the relationship. We want children. We want to build a life together. And what if there's nobody else that's out there? How will we be able to cope with the feelings of loneliness when the relationship ends? Can we leave without there being implications for us? Will they let go easily? Can we leave without having the fear of them stalking us? Or will we need to stay with a friend for a while?

One could argue that religious institutions facilitate patriarchy. Certain strands of Jewish, Islamic and Christian traditional beliefs support the notion that it was within a husband's remit to discipline his wife. Of course, they will say that this is open to interpretation. The danger with that, is that it has planted the seed in worshippers' minds. Has someone ever stood up in a mosque and talked back to the priest, challenging the content of his sermon? And why must it always be a man who is the source of religious wisdom? Is the female's perspective lost in the rigidity and dogmatism of religion? Just because this approach may have been taken for centuries, is it reflective of the current reality of society where women have a voice and that their views are just as important?

⁹ The Effects of Child Abuse and Exposure to Domestic Violence on Adolescent Internalizing and Externalizing Behavior Problems - [Carrie A. Moylan](#), [Todd I. Herrenkohl](#), [Cindy Sousa](#), [Emiko A. Tajima](#), [Roy C. Herrenkohl](#), and [M. Jean Russo](#)

If we look to history, women were only given the right to vote in 1928, which was only a few years after my maternal grandmother was born. Women were only given the right to drive in Saudi Arabia in 2018. How are we expected to attest value to our own voices when society has only accepted basic human rights being afforded to women in under a century?

The other issue that I encountered on multiple occasions was the issue of consent. What is consent if we as women have been brought up in a society where patriarchy has been institutionalised? Is it informed consent if a man continuously pressures us into saying “yes”? Or have we been socially and culturally conditioned to never say “no”?

After we’ve ended a relationship and he doesn’t want to let go, should we simply say that those hand-written love letters and hot churros sent to our home on a Friday is just cute behaviour and nothing to be concerned about? Or should we start worrying when he enters the premises and leaves a Valentine’s Day present in our carpark on a Sunday afternoon?

Is it our fault that they don’t respect boundaries? Or is it theirs?

It is important to educate women by getting them to understand how abusers tend to push boundaries to the point where our consent has been eroded and we simply give in. Why formalise the whole concept of abuse when it’s happening under our very eyes? It very often starts off small, and then has a snowball effect.

As women, we are brought up to be compliant and say yes. Say yes when we are afforded opportunities but accept sexual harassment in the workplace whilst we try and earn an honest wage and not be paid the same as our male counterparts. We are expected to keep our mouths shut when a man has talked us into having sex with him, when all we’re thinking of is that he didn’t use a condom and that he’s playing Russian Roulette with our ovaries. We are expected to be mothers, wives and daughters in law whilst holding a full-time job and managing the household. The list goes on.

Because of the pressures society puts on us simply by the virtue of our existence, we very often must do as we are told. This could be through values passed down to us by perhaps from religious teachings, cultural and/or social norms that remind us that we as women are meant to bear the burden of childbirth and reminds us of our second-class status in society by simply being female.

I'm also mindful of the nuances where there might not be an end date for victims of abuse where they must keep liaising with their abuser if they share custody of their children. There are other scenarios where one's abuser may have been incarcerated and the female victim must constantly be on the lookout for her abuser. The issue of rehabilitation of abusers and whether sentencing guidelines and judicial training on the subject reflects the correct outcome in terms of ensuring that abusers are kept away from their victims, is a separate (but extremely important) topic. Will there ever be an end to this? Is the danger over even if the victim escapes their abuser? If society hasn't caught up yet, we as women need to educate ourselves and protect ourselves.

I want this book to empower women. What we as women need to understand is that the most important relationship is the one that we have with ourselves, we can't value ourselves and live to our fullest potential whilst being with someone who doesn't value us.

I don't want any other woman to go through what I went through. I want you to be able to identify controlling and abusive conduct earlier on. I want you to discover the power of your voice so that you can go on to achieving great things for yourself. And who knows, it might just be a woman who discovers the cure for cancer.

This book is for every girl and woman in the world.

STEP 1

REMOVE THE ROSE-TINTED GLASSES

14th February 2020 2.42pm, London

"Is this Sofi?" a man asked me over the phone.

"Yes it is, sorry who is speaking?" I queried.

"Is your husband Javed?" the man asked.

"...yes...sorry who is this again?" I asked again.

"I'm very sorry Sofi but I have some bad news for you. Your husband has been having an affair for the past 2 years with my wife. I found out last year in April and we've been separated since," the man said quietly.

If there was ever a moment where I felt my heart physically stopped beating, this would be it. I felt like the carpet beneath me swallowed me up. I felt nauseous with anxiety. I needed to get to the bottom of this.

"I'm sorry but who are you? What do you mean my husband is having an affair? And what's the name of your wife?" I asked.

"Ex-wife," he corrected. "Her name is Linda, and I am Omar. And I'm guessing that you don't believe me, judging from the tone of your voice," he said.

"I'm struggling to understand why you are calling me at work, on a corporate line. I don't know who you are or what you want but I'm not entirely convinced that you are telling me the truth.

What is your motive? And if you left her last year, why are you only coming forward now?" I pressed.

"I thought you had the right to know," he responded, "And I have proof that what I am telling you is the truth."

He then proceeded to provide me with details of my personal life. He knew about my parents, their professions and where they worked. He also told me that he knew my brother had a wedding the year before, and that he knew where I lived.

"How do you know all of this? And this information can very easily be accessed by a scammer with anyone who has enough motive," I said in a matter-of-factly manner.

"You don't know what I have been through, this has been a lot. This has not only impacted me but my entire family. I didn't feel the need to reach out immediately because my life was falling apart," Omar sobbed.

My heart broke when I heard this. Intuitively I knew that these weren't crocodile tears - this was real pain. I could hear the hurt and sorrow in his voice. I suddenly felt sick with guilt and remorse.

I knew I had to talk to someone about this immediately and the only person I could think of was my mother. I hesitantly thanked Omar for calling me to let me know, and slowly put the phone down. Thankfully I had my own office so I could process this devastating news in my very own private air-conditioning.

I called my mother and she answered the phone immediately. I asked her whether my father was in the room and if he was, she was to leave the room so I could speak to her alone. She did this and asked me what the matter was. I told her about what Omar told me and immediately I could hear her voice quaver and her breath shorten. She was devastated by the news and quite understandably so.

She started with her line of questioning. Who? What? Where? When? How? I wish I knew all the answers to her questions. She too, like me, was initially cynical about the phone call.

I knew I needed to know the entire truth, I wanted to confront Javed about this. But there were other factors at play. I needed to understand my legal position, and there was a lot on the line financially. Something within me also knew that deceit was a pattern of behaviour. Where there was some, there would be more.

I told my mother to tell my father after we finished speaking. My father was of the view that Javed and I needed to sit down and talk about this, to express our feelings and to discuss what needed to be done to save our marriage. At the time this was revealed to me, I was fully intent on saving our marriage and working things out with Javed. When I saw Javed later on, I held him and silently cried without him noticing. I barely ate anything that evening and when he asked me why I hadn't eaten, I said it was because of work-related stress.

It was such a strange feeling. I always thought that infidelity would make me feel angry and resentful. In fact it did the complete opposite. Yes it broke my heart but it also made me feel like I should have felt determined to work on my marriage. However I knew that intuitively, I needed to get to the bottom of this. I needed to know about the extent of the affair and what I was working with here. To do that, I couldn't say anything to Javed, at least not immediately.

I had bought roses for him that day given it was Valentine's Day and I handed it to him after which I hugged him tightly. How could so much love and compassion exist with so much deceit, all in the very same heart? I needed to find out more.

And so, my ten month-long journey began.

Yes, this happened to me.

We all know that feeling. Something feels off right? Or has it been feeling off for a while and things have just accumulated? What did they say to you? Was it more of the usual? Except this time it was worse right? From shouting at you and saying that you were shit, making you feel like your background, your accomplishments and all that you are simply isn't good enough? Or was it the suspicious phone call he decided to take in the back garden, because he didn't want you to overhear?

Disrespect is the same as deceit. Where there's some, there will be more. We could phrase it as a 'propensity to act in a certain way'. The hard truth of this, is that there are very often red flags from the outset. We just decide to ignore them.

What is domestic abuse?

I hate to get academic here, but the United Nations provides a helpful definition on what it is.

Domestic abuse is typically manifested as a pattern of abusive behaviour toward an intimate partner in a dating or family relationship, where the abuser exerts power and control over the victim.

Domestic abuse can be mental, physical, economic or sexual in nature. Incidents are rarely isolated, and usually escalate in frequency and severity. Domestic abuse may culminate in serious physical injury or death.

Does your partner do the following?

- *Embarrass or make fun of you in front of your friends or family?*
- *Put down your accomplishments?*
- *Make you feel like you are unable to make decisions?*
- *Use intimidation or threats to gain compliance?*
- *Tell you that you are nothing without them?*
- *Treat you roughly—grab, push, pinch, shove or hit you?*

- *Call you several times a night or show up to make sure you are where you said you would be?*
- *Use drugs or alcohol as an excuse for saying hurtful things or abusing you?*
- *Blame you for how they feel or act?*
- *Pressure you sexually for things you aren't ready for?*
- *Make you feel like there is "no way out" of the relationship?*
- *Prevent you from doing things you want – like spending time with friends or family?*
- *Try to keep you from leaving after a fight or leave you somewhere after a fight to "teach you a lesson"?*

Does any of the following apply to you?

- *Sometimes feel scared of how your partner may behave?*
- *Constantly make excuses to other people for your partner's behaviour?*
- *Believe that you can help your partner change if only you changed something about yourself?*
- *Try not to do anything that would cause conflict or make your partner angry?*
- *Always do what your partner wants you to do instead of what you want?*
- *Stay with your partner because you are afraid of what your partner would do if you broke up?¹⁰*

There are different buckets of abuse. Unfortunately for me, I have experienced every single category of abuse below. Don't be shocked if you find this to be the case for yourself, this is extremely common. Abusers tend to push boundaries to see what else they can get away with, and this has a snowball effect.

¹⁰ <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/what-is-domestic-abuse#:~:text=Domestic%20abuse%20is%20typically%20manifested,economic%20or%20sexual%20in%20nature.>

Physical and sexual assaults, or threats to commit them, are the most apparent forms of domestic abuse and violence and are usually the actions that allow others to become aware of the problem. However, regular use of other abusive behaviors by the abuser, when reinforced by one or more acts of physical violence, make up a larger system of abuse. Although physical assaults may occur only once or occasionally, they instill the fear of future violent attacks and allow the abuser to take control of the victim's life and circumstances.

Emotional abuse includes undermining a person's sense of self-worth through constant criticism; belittling one's abilities; name-calling or other verbal abuse; damaging a partner's relationship with the children; or not letting a partner see friends and family. You may be in an emotionally abusive relationship if your partner:

- *Calls you names, insults you or continually criticises you.*
- *Does not trust you and acts in a jealous or possessive manner.*
- *Tries to isolate you from family or friends.*
- *Monitors where you go, whom you call and with whom you spend your time.*
- *Does not want you to work.*
- *Controls finances or refuses to share money.*
- *Punishes you by withholding affection.*
- *Expects you to ask permission.*
- *Threatens to hurt you, the children, your family or your pets.*
- *Humiliates you in any way.*

Psychological abuse: *involves causing fear by intimidation; threatening physical harm to self, partner or children; destruction of pets and property; "mind games"; or forcing isolation from friends, family, school and/or work.*

Financial or economic abuse: involves making or attempting to make a person financially dependent by maintaining total control over financial resources, withholding access to money, and/or forbidding attendance at school or employment.

Physical abuse: involves hurting or trying to hurt a partner by hitting, kicking, burning, grabbing, pinching, shoving, slapping, hair-pulling, biting, denying medical care or forcing alcohol and/or drug use, or using other physical force. You may be in a physically abusive relationship if your partner:

- Damages property when angry (throws objects, punches walls, kicks doors, etc.).
- Pushes, slaps, bites, kicks or chokes you.
- Abandons you in a dangerous or unfamiliar place.
- Scares you by driving recklessly.
- Uses a weapon to threaten or hurt you.
- Forces you to leave your home.
- Traps you in your home or keeps you from leaving.
- Prevents you from calling police or seeking medical attention.
- Hurts your children.
- Uses physical force in sexual situations.

Sexual abuse: involves forcing a partner to take part in a sex act when the partner does not consent. You may be in a sexually abusive relationship if your partner:

- Accuses you of cheating or is often jealous of your outside relationships.
- Wants you to dress in a sexual way.
- Insults you in sexual ways or calls you sexual names.
- Has ever forced or manipulated you into having sex or performing sexual acts.
- Holds you down during sex.
- Demands sex when you are sick, tired or after beating you.

- *Hurts you with weapons or objects during sex.*
- *Involves other people in sexual activities with you.*
- *Ignores your feelings regarding sex.*

Stalking involves any pattern of behavior that serves no legitimate purpose and is intended to harass, annoy, or terrorize the victim. Typical stalking activities include repeated telephone calls, unwelcome letters or gifts by mail, surveillance at work, home and other places that the victim is known to frequent. Stalking usually escalates.¹¹

The point is, is that you're here. Your instinct has picked up on something. What are you planning on doing? You should discuss it with them right? That's what's expected, right? Our partner is our blanket in life. They are meant to be soft, comforting and reliable. A sanctuary really. You don't feel like you're in an oasis now, do you? You feel that heat generated from inside your bones. Flushed with anxiety, heavy in the head. You don't know what to think, you don't know what to do. I'll tell you what to do.

A woman's power is in her silence.

Say. Nothing.

Have you ever heard of whistleblowers? They sense something is wrong and they report it to the authorities and can claim all kinds of statutory reliefs from criminal conviction under the law? They don't tell the perpetrator of the crime that they are onto them because it will give them the upper-hand and an opportunity to flee.

What you are about to do requires patience and strategy. You have been disrespected. If you tell them, you give them the upper hand. They can plan and think ahead. Men already have an unfair advantage by virtue of their physical strength, and the fact that the law and the justice system is stacked against women. After everything your abuser has put you through, do you

¹¹ Ibid.

want them to win? They made you feel like you were losing for months, maybe years. Do you want to gift that to them? Do you, really?

We don't understand the implications of alerting our abusive partner that we are onto them. We don't understand the implications of it. You have been gifted with knowledge, and knowledge is power. Don't share with them that you have processed their behaviour and that you are on to them, because if you do, you lose your power.

This may feel hard for you. You're being told by someone you don't know to keep something from someone you've known and trusted for years. Why trust in what I'm saying when you've always trusted in him? I will only say this once in this entire guide, trust your intuition. There were always signs that this was someone you couldn't trust, you know that and I do. The worst thing that women do to themselves is being a slave to their emotions. Our innate nature to care and nurture others has been used by men for centuries against us. It's time to flip the script.

If they have been so fucking predictable in terms of giving into their caveman instincts, then we too can give off the impression that we can seem as predictable with us being the carers that we've always been. The emotional ones. The soft ones. The weak ones. The vulnerable ones. He must think all these things about you, in order for this to work. You need to slide into that second-skin that he's so used to seeing and go within so that you can strategise getting out. The word "abuse" must never come out of your mouth. For this to work, he can never know that you are onto his behaviour.

There are legal implications for everything in a relationship. Whether you are married or living with them, there are certain rights and responsibilities both or one party has towards the other. Because the scales are not tipped in your favour owing to the patriarchal constructs that exist in our society, you are well within your rights to act in your best interests. That means

strategising without them knowing. The other chapters in this guide will teach you how to do that.

Unless of course, you care about them. Let's put this into perspective, do you feel cared for? Then why should you care for someone who doesn't care about you? Perhaps you need time to process your feelings for this person and why you absolutely mustn't alert your abuser to the fact that you have processed and thought about their behaviour and that you are considering exiting the relationship. Your abuser will be looking for signs of changed behaviour, and you must be aware of this.

But there will reach a point (I promise), where you will see the wood from the trees. It certainly did for me. My only worry for you is that it might be too late.

My trigger that something wasn't right, was the infidelity. Before this, I lived a life of not understanding that what was happening to me was domestic abuse. My hope for every single woman out there is that she can identify domestic abuse from the outset without there being an unrelated trigger that gets her thinking about whether she is in an abusive relationship.

These eight steps are pure strategy and you need to hear them. You need to understand the importance of keeping your knowledge of this to yourself. Whether it's knowledge of his nefarious activity, or whether you are starting to feel that this ongoing behaviour is feeling slightly abusive and that you didn't deserve any of it. Just remember that if you are at this point where you have realised that this is abusive behaviour, count yourself lucky that you're still alive. Most abusers tend to keep pushing boundaries to see what they can get away with, until it's too late and you're dead. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but that's the reality of domestic abuse. Globally as many as 38% of all murders of women are committed by intimate partners¹².

¹² WHO international statistics, March 2024

Now that we've gotten the objective out of the way, subjectively, how do you feel?

Ok so you have children with them. You have a mortgage. A joint account. Holidays coming up. A family event to attend tomorrow and you need them to buy the roast chicken with lemons to garnish. Oh, and you also care about them. You're in love, and you always expected to be in love, and that they would love you too.

Whilst you give so much importance to what people, society and appearances look like, if you're not happy then what's it all for? We as women are meant to live a fulfilling and wholesome life. I understand that some of us are on the hamster-wheel, just running through life on routine and doing what everybody else seems to be doing. Mating, marrying, reproducing and cohabiting. But do we question what's beneath the surface? Or are we just conforming to societal expectations? Falling in love is great, I'm sure. But what happens when that same love turns rancid?

There is always a moment for women when the emotional penny drops. We aren't talking about abusers' objectively reprehensible behaviour anymore; we are talking about how you perceive their behaviour and understand that it is something you are not willing to put up with. There's always a tipping point. What will it be for you? Will it be the moment he grabs you by the wrist and twists it, watching you writhe in pain, as he tells you that he doesn't want you to go out to dinner with your friends that night? Will it be the bags of womens' lingerie that you discover in three large duffel bags in your attic? Will it be the second phone that he keeps so that he can message other women? Or was it the direct debit on one of his secret bank accounts, where they paid a subscription to a dating website?

It really does depend on what your boundaries are, and when these have been crossed. Now don't get me wrong, infidelity and abuse are two very different beasts. Sometimes these get rolled into one, which not only makes you feel disrespected but betrayed. But the common

theme here is disrespect. Do you feel disrespected? If you do, then we're on to something here.

Now that we've established there is disrespect, the difficulty is that you still care. If you still care, your abuser will hold you hostage to your feelings. They will invalidate your perspective, and make you feel less than. They will gaslight you into thinking that they're never really the problem, your paranoia is. You will always be the problem, and the difficulty here is, that you will always believe them if you still care about what they think.

Why would you give one person so much gravitas in your life, that you respect their opinion more than yourself? Who are you? You were who you were, before you even met them. Your character and values were formed, before you met them. So why give this person so much power in your life?

I understand that when you get married and/or live together with your partner, your lives become inextricably fused. You share financials, children, holidays, friends together, would you ever be able to live your life without them? Could you manage your life without them? If you really feel like you are completely dependent on them emotionally, financially and spiritually, then we have a problem.

Your sense of self is independent of the person you are with. Once you are out of this relationship, you will discover this. Being intentionally single for years was the best healing and growth that I could have ever accomplished for myself. Why? Because I didn't know who I was before or during my relationship. I started my life with a set of indoctrinated beliefs thrust upon me, and I had to live up to standards I didn't genuinely believe in. I just did what I needed to do as a young adult, because if I didn't then I would encounter resistance. Where was the empowerment? Where was the self-discovery? There was none. Imagine taking that energy into a relationship. It was a complete disaster. I had no boundaries and he got away with a lot.

The reason I am focusing so much here on how you feel, is because it is important. You need to understand that whilst you feel like you love and/or care for your abuser for whatever reason, you need to put yourself first. Because if you don't, you will keep accepting the abusive behaviour and you just may end up murdered by them.

Sorry, I don't have time to mince my words. You need to understand the gravitas of the situation. My abuser was never physically abusive to me in a way where I felt like my life was at stake. The day I told him I was leaving him, he grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me towards him. I wasn't quite sure how I freed myself from his grip, but I did, and I ran as fast as I could. The point is, is that I was prepared. I was prepared for him to get physical, despite the fact that he had never gotten that physical before. Once an abuser, always an abuser. It doesn't matter if he's further down the scale of abuse. It's only a matter of time before he'll try another form of abuse. Why? Because he's gotten used to eroding your boundaries. It's a pattern of behaviour. Now that you have this knowledge, use that pattern to your advantage. You must prepare yourself.

If you, like me, have not been set up to discover who you are, I understand where you're coming from. The good news is that your life after you leave them, will get better. Imagine waking up every single morning feeling limitless and at peace. I know right? It will be amazing. But to get there, you need to go through this.

If you had a solid sense of self before encountering your abuser, then the contrast will be greater. And with any luck, the penny will drop a lot sooner.

Either way, there is a way out. The first step is accepting that there is something wrong with your relationship, and it's not you. If you've reached this point, congratulations, and keep reading.

STEP 2

MAINTAIN A POKER-FACE

Pretending like everything is ok when it isn't, is much harder than you think. You have somehow suppressed your emotional and mental health and well-being into the size of a pill, compartmentalising human aspects of yourself just so that you can get your ducks in a row.

Now in no way am I suggesting that any woman stay in an abusive relationship. If you feel that your life is being threatened and that threat is imminent, you should call the police and get out as soon as you can. If you think that tonight you will be choked to death by your abuser, playing the long game isn't the best course of action for you. As discussed previously, this guide is designed for the woman who has the benefit of identifying that what's happening to her is abuse, and her abuser doesn't know that she's caught onto this fact. That woman feels like she can't get out safely if she were to suddenly pull the plug on the relationship, and yet so badly wants more than anything to get out.

I've expressed my views on patriarchal power constructs that exist within society. Men are already at an advantage. They have had a head start on gaining access to resources, whereas women have had to fight for their resources and place in society. Men never really had to fight, as they've always been at an advantage in the first place. If you somehow indicate to a man that you've not only identified his behaviour as abusive, but that you'll be doing something about it, that's just dangerous. Tip anyone off and they'll have a chance to pre-plan, and trust me, with that head-start plus that extra knowledge, you're really putting yourself on the back-foot.

It depends on how much of a long game you want to play. A lot of it depends on the scale of the abuse and how much due diligence you need to do to get all the information you need. Also, do you need to do any due diligence? Even if you think that it's just domestic abuse, let

me tell you something, shadiness is a pattern of behaviour. Specifically, deceit. If he's cheating on you and abusing you, trust me honey, there's more to the story.

You need to get your head around how you want to play this, but there needs to be an end-date in mind. You need time to think. If you have children in the mix, you will need to factor that in too. Worrying about their stability is a reason why some women stay in abusive relationships. The administration around leaving an abusive partner may seem overwhelming, but you need to realise that by staying with this person, you are reducing yourself to half. You will eventually turn into a hologram and before you know it, you are living for that person and not for yourself. The relationships around you will suffer, your career will suffer, and so on. Oh, and not to mention, you're risking your life every single day you stay with your abuser.

You may switch in between feeling like you want to give this a go, that maybe his behaviour isn't really all that bad and you might be able to get past this over time. Trust me, you won't. You'll keep revisiting this. Your intuition will be kicking off so badly, leaving you with tortured thoughts first thing in the morning and before you go to bed at night. Sure, your career and/or children may keep you busy, but it's when you are alone that you'll feel it the most.

This needs to be a firm decision. Once you go down this route of maintaining a poker face, you can't change your mind and switch it up. They will never forgive you if they found out you were sneaking around behind your back trying to find a way out, making a fool of them. If there's one thing that I know that women can do, is to have this ability to go undercover and maintain a strong exterior so that they get what they want. The betrayal, abuse, heartbreak must be of such a magnitude that it pushes us to resort to this. I'm sorry that you're here, but I'm not sorry that you are now armed with this knowledge. You now know that it is possible to get out.

I'm not going to say this is going to be a straight-forward process. At times it might feel like a combination of love, pain, hatred, self-blame and funnily enough - forgiveness. I was brought

up in a very matriarchal family where women ran the show. I was always the girl first in line to attend radical feminist rallies during university, and the first to champion women's rights and freedoms to my friends and family. I was the tough bitch; nothing could get by me.

I always thought I was the type to never forgive infidelity because of my pride, but for some reason within twenty-four hours of a phone call where I was informed of my now ex's infidelity, I forgave. I forgave because a part of me wanted to still believe that this relationship could be salvaged. I loved that man and genuinely thought that this was a minor blip and that we could make this work. Looking back, I now realise that most women would have undoubtedly gone through this process. I used to judge those who took back cheating ex-partners in the past, but now I realise that I was playing out the same story.

Because I am able to empathise with this process, I can understand why even when the largest of red flags do appear, that women can't imagine their lives without their partners. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but your life will be pretty great without them. In fact, it only gets better and better the moment you are rid of that toxicity and start working on yourself and getting focused on what your needs are.

For now, say nothing.

An important part of maintaining a poker face is not entrusting people with knowledge of this who are likely to blow your cover. Don't tell mutual friends or untrustworthy family members. For example, I only told my parents, my best friend and my lawyer that I would be enacting this guide. I didn't even tell my brother. That was because I wasn't sure he would be able to hold his emotions together and he would then blow my cover. He wouldn't have to suffer the consequences of that, I would. And because of that, I didn't tell him until the final step of the guide, which was two weeks before I decided to confront my abuser and get out.

This guide isn't a joke. Your life depends on this. Be discerning about who you inform of the plan, and keep it off text message if possible, especially if your abuser has access to your devices.

I can talk you through the different ways in which you can maintain a poker face, but the reality is that only you will know what's best in the given circumstances. As I've mentioned before, a woman's silence is her greatest strength. It doesn't mean we don't know anything and we aren't being proactive, it just means we've gone to an introspective place to discover a different part of ourselves and we don't feel the need to tell people about it. And why should we? Whose business is it exactly? It's your life. You decide who you share information with. The best part about remaining silent, at least to your average heterosexual man, is that you are compliant. Appearing to be compliant means he'll think you are up to nothing. Keep it that way.

I write about how different women in various circumstances use their silence to leave their abusers in *Herstories*. This may inspire you in your own way. Just try to avoid smirking like I did, after every time my abuser yelled at me over something! The smirk (to me at least) represented that one extra paragraph in my witness statement to support my draft application for a restraining order that I was working on without his knowledge. Every time he abused me, he gave me ammunition that would help me get out of the relationship. I won't say that I did it perfectly. I tried my best to appear like everything was normal, but in hindsight, I could have done a better job.

This chapter might be one of the shortest, but it's key to enacting this guide.

STEP 3

DO YOUR DUE DILIGENCE

This can look like a different process to people, depending on where you are coming from. I decided to wrap two steps into one, namely getting legal advice and doing your due diligence.

Speaking to a lawyer who was able to advise me on what my financial position would like if I filed for divorce was essential. It depends on who has control over the finances and who has been doing the financial heavy lifting. If you have children, you'll also be factoring them into the picture whether it's child-minding as a single parent, paying for school fees and keeping a roof over their heads. You have a lot to think about, and my best advice would always be to speak to a lawyer before you speak to family and friends.

The reason for this is that you don't know who will be in your corner. You don't know which family member and/or friend may tip him off. Select a couple of people you can trust, and if you don't have these people around you, then trust your lawyer. At the very least, they are bound by a general duty of confidentiality.

Does he keep your passport? Are there laws in the country that you are in which prevent anyone from doing that? Are restraining orders against abusers who have children with the victim? How quickly can you get a no-fault divorce? Are the proceedings in any way expedited if you file on the basis that there is domestic abuse? Are there processes in place to prevent abusers using divorce proceedings to further the abuse? These are the types of questions you should be asking your lawyer.

You can carry out your due diligence in tandem (i.e., whilst being advised by a lawyer). There are certain things you'll want to know legally, and others on a more personal level. For me, it was trying to understand the scale of what I was dealing with. Was it only one instance of infidelity or are there others?

Do you have visibility of the financials? Or does he? Even if you think you have visibility of the financials, you should probably investigate it yourself (of course within the limits of the law). The truth is very often in plain sight. Sometimes under a stack of papers in the study you share with him. Sometimes in a locked bag on a top shelf, with the keys in the kitchen drawer lying in plain sight. The thing is, they know you trust them and have trusted them for so long, so they will inevitably take that trust for granted. Use that to your advantage. Check with your lawyer as to how you can go about this within the limits of the law, so that anything you do discover is admissible when you do file for divorce.

Wait until they leave the house to have another affair, that you of course now know about (for example). Then verify. Make sure they don't come back by the way, watch them walk down the street and out of plain sight and then do your digging. Hidden credit cards and several bank statements are real-life examples of things discovered by a cheating partner, by the way. When we trust we never think we need to verify. Trust has been broken, and now you need to protect your interests.

How will you be paying for legal advice? Make sure you are either paying in cash, or alternatively use a credit card he doesn't have access to. Alternatively, discuss payment solutions with your lawyer. You absolutely can't get caught paying for a lawyer.

If you have joint finances, you may need to start making up expenses. If you have children, blame it on them. There may be some medical emergency you'll need to tend to for their sakes, which might explain the ATM withdrawal that will pay for your lawyer. Don't make it too far-fetched, you may need to schedule in a paediatrician appointment to make it more believable.

Your lawyer might also advise you to create a will or amend it. Imagine if a car hits you tomorrow and you die, and the situation is such that your partner owns everything that was

once yours. You must make sure that your will reflects your intentions, and if you want out, make sure that your will has been updated.

You're in the process of doing your due diligence and putting things together. When you do take pictures of things and you are putting things together for your lawyer, try using cloud storage to save these down. Preferably a cloud storage that's not on your iPhone or shared devices. It needs to be password protected and filed using a non-descript title, like the name of a previous or current employer.

Don't keep photos of things you have discovered on your phone. You need to also make sure that your devices are locked down. Some abusive partners have access to the codes on their partners' phones. You need to be able to outsmart them. You need to also use and create an email address that might be separate to your own and not have that accessible on your mobile phone. You can also use a work computer and/or a work email address. Like I said, there are ways to get around this. You just need to pre-plan.

And what about those women who don't have access to their own finances and are reliant on their abuser financially? This view is not going to be popular but hear me out.

I give you permission to steal.

That's right, steal from him. Skim money off the top of transactions, create bills that don't exist (link these to children's expenses if you have any) and make it a gradual process. It can't be in large increments; you'll know how stupid your abuser is and how much you are able to get one over him without him noticing so play it by ear.

During this time, you will hate your abuser. Every little thing that he does is going to make you squirm. Watching him pick his teeth as he drives you to the supermarket is going to make you want to rip his incisors out of his mouth. When he yells at you to keep your voice down as

you're speaking to his mother whilst clutching the very same phone, he's messaging other women with, trust me, you're going to want to strangle him with a smile on your face.

I'm not saying there's a perfect way of doing this. You may slip and let them know how you feel about them. You may shoot them hateful glances. You may feel this white-hot heat coursing through your body when you see him sneak into his car so that he can have a conversation without you listening. This is all a part of the process. What you're having to do, is to suppress your true feelings about someone you're living with so that you can plot your way out of this relationship. This will be mentally and emotionally draining on you.

It really does depend on how resilient you are. I'm going to repeat myself again. I would never advise someone to stay in a relationship with someone if it is physically or mentally threatening to their well-being. You know yourself best. If you think you won't be able to see this through until the end, you will need to speak to your lawyer on how to get the best outcome possible.

There are days you'll question yourself. Wondering if this really is what you want, and what's best for the family. Do you want your child/children raised in an environment which is toxic and abusive? That will be their modus operandi going forward, and they will cast this model into their own lives. If you don't want a repeat of this behaviour in the generations to come, you will nip this in the bud.

I want to also talk about the importance of being kind to yourself. You are in a nasty situation, where you're having to keep your mouth shut to gain an advantage over someone you thought was your person. Think of it like a switch, whilst you're in it now once you're out it will be like flipping a switch. One day they'll have a partner, the next day they won't. You won't look back and feel bad at all. Why? Because you spent those months getting your ducks in a row, forced to live with a person you no longer want to be with anymore. And when you're done, there won't be any regrets because you had these months to see the wood from the trees.

I have spoken about women being a slave to their emotions when it comes to their partners. Sure, you loved a version of them at a certain point in time. People evolve, but people also mask their true character. In certain cultures, and religions, you would never live with a person until after marriage. You only really get to know the person when you live with them, and sometimes it's easier to hide things from a partner when you haven't had the chance to live with them.

People also often get into relationships to be financially savvy, it's cheaper to share a one-bedroom flat with your partner than share a house with six other people, right? I'll try and stick to the subject at hand, which is the importance of identifying abuse and getting out, but I'm also trying to be as realistic as I can because I understand what binds people to abusive partners and finances are unfortunately one of those reasons.

The short answer to the above, is that there is always a way out. The idea of leaving your comfortable set-up might be daunting at first but the whole idea behind pre-planning is so you can have a think about your resources, options, friends, family and third alternatives in terms of finding your feet after leaving this person.

If you have financial independence, then you are lucky. If you are in a situation where you don't have someplace to go that is within your financial means, you should discuss this with your lawyer. I say this because in situations where there is domestic abuse, if you call the police on your abuser, they will be removed from your home. You won't be. It of course depends on the country you're in and what the law says, but there are ways in which you can ensure that you keep a roof over your head whilst getting out of an abusive situation. You just need to strategise and make sure that you seek advice on this issue.

I once had a friend who stayed with an abusive boyfriend, after he took thousands of dollars from her, forced her to have an abortion and cheated on her multiple times. She still stayed. Why did she stay? Because he apologised, he told her he loved her and that he'd never do it

again. It was like a vicious cycle playing itself out multiple times. Women don't realise how much time they waste being in these types of relationships. All those years trying to make it work with someone who is defective. And that's exactly how you should see him as. Defective. A product that has been put out on the shelves for the rest of humanity to deal with. A dangerous person. A narcissist who will turn things on you, making it look like you are the crazy one. These defective members live in our society, and they pay taxes just like you and I, when arguably they should be behind bars and never be allowed to get out. My disagreement on the length of custodial sentences afforded to abusers is outside the scope of this guide, but my firm belief is that abusers shouldn't be allowed to leave prison.

Abuse can't be remediated with a course of anger management classes, or a stint in jail. Abuse goes to a person's character. I've worked with some pretty wild and wacky colleagues, and after encountering domestic abuse, I was easily able to identify abusive patterns in the working environment as well. Being thrown under the bus, passive aggressive emails sent on a Friday, unregulated behaviour of being excessively nice one moment and being hostile the next. And these weren't even from men, these were from women.

I'm not going to sit here and say that men are the problem. In any setting whether it's professional or personal, abuse takes place. When you learn to identify abuse in one context, you tend to spot these in others as well. This knowledge will arm you with the ability to understand how abusers operate, whether its gaslighting when you thought that this was someone you could trust. The only person you can trust is yourself, your judgment is golden.

The other piece of advice I would give, is to do more of what makes you feel good. There might be a period where the things that used to make you feel good no longer do so. I felt nauseous every second of every day when I found out that my partner was cheating on me. Going for a leisurely morning run didn't feel the same as it used to. Once I got objective, I started to feel better about things. Sitting in the knowledge of betrayal and not knowing what to do about it was anxiety inducing. You need to feel like you are in control of your life, and

perhaps having known that you don't deserve this level of disrespect and starting to map your way out will be your way of getting solution oriented and feeling like there is light at the end of the tunnel.

The best part about the eight-step guide, is that the longer you spend time planning to leave your abuser and observing his behaviour and conduct from that perspective, the less you will feel for him. After my ten months of planning were over, I felt nothing but contempt for my abuser. I hope that you feel the same for yours when this is all over.

STEP 4

MAKING A LIST AND SCENARIO-PLANNING

I've always liked lists.

There are more standardised lists perhaps relating to drafting applications and orders, but then there are the lists that you create based on your specific knowledge of your abuser.

If you have obtained legal advice, and I would strongly recommend that you do, then you will need to start collating details. Details that will help you leave your abuser, but there are also details that are more off-piste than just putting together facts to support your restraining order, for example.

Upon your abuser being removed from your home, does he have access to the premises? Has he made spare keys? How many keys are there, and where has he placed them? For example, if he has a spare set in the car and in his gym bag which gives him building access, consider replacing the building access keys with a decoy of the same type and colour as those which you are replacing. I would know because I did this. I knew that my abuser would return to my home, which he did. The very next day.

You can't underestimate what an abuser will do. If he cusses you out in your kitchen frequently, then he is an abuser. An abuser will test boundaries. Just because he hasn't laid a finger on you, doesn't mean he won't if he doesn't get his way. You need to make sure that you have a plan to keep him away from your home. The police may come in handy, but what do you know about your abuser? Is he persistent? What is the nature of the abuse and how long does it last for?

Do you need someone to stay with you after you have confronted your abuser and he has left the premises? I would choose a male family member/friend over a female friend. Male abusers are more intimidated by other men. Make these arrangements now, and the same male family

member/friend should form a part of your confidante circle. Just be careful in terms of how many people you inform of your plans. As a rule, these should not be more than the number of fingers you have on one hand.

A part of collating means creating a document and start from the very beginning. How long have you been in a relationship with your abuser? When did the abuse start? For how long has the abuse continued? You will need to include time and date stamps for accuracy, and if possible, direct quotes.

“You are shit, and you will always be shit.”

*“I’d rather be married to a fat cow than a skinny b*tch like you, because then at least the fat cow will know how to treat a man.”*

Statements like these, are abusive. These are real-life examples by the way. Writing these down as quotes, with context behind the statements (like what was discussed, for how long the abuse lasted for, for example) will not only help you get objective, but it will assist your lawyer to establish domestic abuse. A part of moving forward and pre-planning your exit, is you getting your head around what’s happened to you. As I’ve said before, women are hostage to their emotions. You need to work on not feeling what you feel for this monster. Because that’s exactly what he is, a monster.

Consider whether you can notify the police in advance before they can make an arrest. That’s right, I said arrest. Domestic abuse is a crime. The justice system has not caught up with prosecuting more abusers because let’s face it, the system is and has historically been run by men. Domestic abuse is probably happening in legislators’ own homes. Why try to change something if it doesn’t affect the broad consensus of law-makers who happen to be men? If there is an option for you to call the police ahead of confronting your abuser just to give them a heads up without them tipping off your abuser, consider exploring that option.

Do you have shared financial responsibilities? Is your abuser legally responsible for these even after he has left the home? Is your abuser likely to act in bad faith? If I were you, I would prepare for this scenario. If there are ways you can get your abuser to make payments ahead of him being arrested, do this.

If you have children with your abuser, this adds a slight complication. It depends which country you are in but be mindful of the fact that most justice systems allow rights of access to children even though their father is abusive. For obvious reasons, this does not make sense. This is yet another example of how the legal system does not put itself in the victim's shoes. There are ways you can work with your lawyer and establish ways you can limit contact with your abuser. Can you have a third-party present whilst he makes his visitations? Can you propose him visiting his children at a neutral location such as a park? Do you need to be there? Or is it sufficient that a third party is present? Explore these options with your lawyer.

I appreciate that this is a lot of information, and much of it is scenario specific. There is also a lot of overlap, for example, where there is an item for you to action from a legal perspective, there is very often a corresponding subjective action. When you are planning to leave your abuser, consider whether there is a corresponding subjective action to a measurable objective action. I've included a table for your benefit below. Note that the below assumes that you are married to your abuser.

Objective	Subjective
Draft a witness statement to support your application for a restraining order. Start from the beginning and include examples of abuse that you have been subjected to. Keep it factual.	Read guidance on what the definition of domestic abuse is. How many boxes do you check? Consider whether you have been sexually abused/raped by your abuser. No means no, and if he ever continued to have sex with you without your consent, then it is rape.

Objective	Subjective
Provide information to your lawyer to support your divorce proceedings.	What is the quickest way out to avoid your abuser using divorce proceedings to continue the abuse?
Is he likely to get violent? Ensure that you have a close family member around to help you contact the police or get to a phone if this happens.	If he hasn't gotten violent yet, then you may answer this question in the negative. The truth is, that if he is any version of abusive, it will only be a matter of time before he gets violent. You need to be ready for this, both mentally and emotionally. Can you have a family member wait outside your home with a spare set of keys? Consider removing sharp objects and remove objects like chairs etc. so that you can easily move around your abuser if he tries to grab you. Remove obstructions from your path to the front door. Remove anything from plain sight that your abuser can use to strike you.
Reach out to the police ahead of confronting your abuser without the police tipping off your abuser.	You might not be able to legally exclude your partner from the matrimonial home (and you should explore this with your lawyer), but have you considered the ways in which you can keep yourself safe after he has been arrested? Do you have a locksmith ready? Do you plan to alert your neighbours of this soon after the arrest? Does he have other types of access to the building?
Make arrangements so that a friend or family member to be there with you on the day you confront your abuser.	Consider whether certain friends/family members might aggravate your abuser, which might make the process unnecessarily drawn out/painful. Is it better that a family member wait for you to confront your abuser whilst he/she waits in the

Objective	Subjective
	stairwell with a spare key to your home just in case he/she needs to intervene? What will give you the best possible outcome?
The belongings in your home are matrimonial property. Don't get rid of these until a judge has made an order deciding who takes ownership of these.	His stuff will trigger you. Consider putting his furniture/clothes in a spare room which you don't need to access, or alternatively in a storage facility. Avoid triggers as much as you can, after your abuser has been removed from your home.
Don't hack into any of his devices.	If you've always trusted him, and he knows that you do, he'll assume that you'll be naïve for the rest of your life. Use this position to look through his things. You won't need to hack into a single thing, sometime the truth is very often left in plain sight. Within the bounds of the law and subject to advice from your lawyer, take photos of what you have and upload it to secure cloud storage using cryptic descriptions. You don't know what you might need during your divorce/court proceedings.
Keep your passport safe.	If he is holding onto your passport, make up some bullsh*t reason for you to get a hold of it. If you know where he has kept it and it is accessible, get it back without him knowing the day/night before you plan to confront him about the abuse. If possible, remove it from the premises and keep it in a safe location, perhaps with someone in your trusted circle.
Ensure that you can afford your mortgage if you are dependent on your abuser financially.	Assume that your abuser will make your life difficult for you. Do you have enough in savings

Objective	Subjective
Understand what the legal position is, if your abuser has been removed from the premises. Is he financially responsible for making mortgage payments?	to cover any mortgage payments to avoid your home being repossessed?
Your abuser is responsible for paying for your childrens' school fees. He can't renege on these responsibilities.	As per the above, assume that your abuser will go rogue. If there are bills that he can pay in advance, make up some bullsh*t excuse so that he pays for these ahead of you pulling the trigger.
Your abuser legally has access to your children. Establish how this will work in practice. Assume a minimum of X visits over the course of the week.	Think about establishing clear parameters. Consider having a third party present each time he makes these visits. Limit your contact to him, does he need to see you if he's visiting his children? If you don't need to be in the room whilst he is doing this, don't be. If you have any specific concerns, remember to voice these in your application for a restraining order.
Do you have other shared responsibilities, financial or otherwise?	Especially if these are bills that relate to the home, start changing passwords so that you have sole access to these. If he gets notified if you have removed his access, for example, Kindle Library (this sounds petty as f*ck, but I did this because I didn't want to see my abuser's name on a damn thing).
Have you thought about notifying neighbours upon him being removed from the property?	The last thing you want is a stream of text messages from neighbours, dramatising what has happened. However, notifying them is

Objective	Subjective
	essential. Draft up a text message and save it somewhere safe. Copy and paste this message upon your abuser being removed from the premises and treat it like you are running a well-oiled marketing and publicity campaign. Keep the emotion out of it and be factual.
If you co-habit and own property together, understand that there are rules on protecting your abuser's interests.	Whilst this may be true, there are legal carve-outs available for victims of domestic abuse. Remember to explore these options with your lawyer and understand what you can and can't do within the limits of the law.

This may surprise you, but I only realised I was a victim of domestic abuse about six months in. That's right, I was pre-planning my exit from my abuser for separate reasons. I knew that if I confronted him on the spot about his infidelity, that it would be an administrative nightmare for me. It was only after the rose-tinted glasses came off, and I was drafting up applications for the purposes of my divorce that I discovered I was a victim of domestic abuse.

I read legal guidance on this and began drafting my very own witness statement. Fifty-odd paragraphs later, I had enough. It took me two days to come to terms with the fact that I was a victim of abuse and didn't even realise that I was. I didn't understand how I could not have known this sooner, but he had warped my mind to the extent that I couldn't even identify my own thoughts from his. It was psychological abuse at a level where I had to make myself so small so that he could appear larger than life. Getting objective was a huge part of it, as I was able to identify what was happening to me after I realised that my partner was my enemy and not my friend. I also never stopped looking for signs and evidence of his disrespect. As I was

planning my exit, I was keeping note of the things he said to me and included these in my witness statement to support my application for a restraining order.

Sexual abuse is a very sensitive topic, and we all have our own journeys in terms of understanding what sexual abuse is and whether we've been subjected to it in the past. With sexual abuse comes humiliation, fear and embarrassment. Just understand that including this type of abuse in your pleadings, will strengthen your case.

STEP 5

GET HIM OUT

To be quite honest with you, planning to leave your abuser is the hardest part of the process. There's a lot of compartmentalising that is required, however, you now have the resolve to see this step through. Remember what I said about it taking women on average seven times before they leave their abuser for good? Do you want to be a part of this statistic?

If you've endured abuse from your abuser, then he will know which buttons to push. He'll know what to say to placate and to work his way into your mind and your heart. You'll need tenacity and determination to see this step through. If your heart softens and you let him get to you when he starts gaslighting you the first time, you may as well give in and let him have his way. The difficulty is, is that he will be made aware of the fact that this was premeditated. If you ever revisit the issue of leaving him again (this is not to say that it can't be done) you'll just have to use another strategy because he knows you can lie low. He will be alert to this.

Therefore, there is not a lot I have to say about this step. However, it is the most important step, because it means that those days/weeks/months of planning will finally come to fruition. You have finally made the decision to leave your abuser. Is there hesitation? Are you afraid of the fact that you won't be able to see this through? Are you wavering because you are afraid? Or because you don't think you possess the emotional resilience to deal with the gaslighting and the other forms of abuse he'll subject you too?

As much as you want to think this will feel like a band-aid that you just rip off, it sadly won't be. If I look back to the types of things that were said to me when I expressed wanting to leave my abuser, it was an extension of psychological abuse that had always been there. Just hours of ongoing incessant gaslighting. You don't have to do it alone, remember what I said about having a friend/family member present who won't aggravate the situation. You'll also need an objective pair of eyes to witness what only you are aware of what you went through. You may

feel more confident to say the things that are really on your mind. Remember, you may not ever see your abuser past this point after the police take him away, so use this opportunity to get closure. This may be more important for Step 8, but a huge part of the internal dialogue post-abuse might be, *“Why do bad things happen to good people?”* or *“Did I ever really deserve this?”*

There’s absolutely nothing wrong about thinking of what you want to get out of this. Removing your abuser from your home is the first and most important step, because you are removing the immediate threat of him. You are no longer breathing in the same oxygen as him and trust me, that’s a gift in and of itself.

But what do you want to say to him to gain closure? Remember that he will gaslight you and invalidate your perspective. He is also unlikely to accept the fact that he is abusive at all. He’ll make you think that you’re crazy.

There’s a lot to be said about pathologising women, and where this becomes dangerous territory is where they are victims of abuse. It’s one thing to say that she’s a crazy bitch when she’s torched his favourite Italian suits after she’s found out her husband has had multiple mistresses (and rightly so), but it’s another thing saying that a woman is overreacting where she expresses that she is no longer going to put up with abusive behaviour. The stakes here are higher – womens’ lives are at risk.

Once I got my ducks in a row, I chose a date. I chose this date two weeks before I did it. I made sure that everything was in order and I was emotionally and mentally ready to be rid of him.

Now I’m sure every woman who is planning an escape route has her own list, based on the type of man she’s leaving and what she knows of him. You need to make sure that your list isn’t a static one, it’s a living breathing list of items which change according to circumstances that come your way.

The closer you get to D-day, the higher your cortisol levels will be. There's no way to be calm about this, you'll be shattered the days before and the days to come. But I promise you this, there are better days ahead.

You will no longer wake up next to an abuser who has made you feel like a hollow carcass. You'll teach your children the importance of valuing themselves and that they should never put up with abuse, through your courageous actions. Your circle will change, and once you rid yourself of one form of toxicity, you'll discover new and more empowering individuals who'll bring you up rather than tearing you down. You'll discover a form of empathy and bravery within yourself that you never knew existed. You'll feel limitless, and your abundance will quadruple. Trust me, I went through this process.

Had Omar not called me that day in February, I wouldn't have known Javed's real character. He fooled me, but he wouldn't ever do that to me ever again. So when you do receive that phone call, be grateful. Knowledge is power. Get your ducks in a row and press on. This process can take anything from a month to a year, follow your instinct and you will know when the right time is to leave.

I can't describe to you exactly how it was that I felt. It was a combination of calm, which should have come with a sense of relief. There was some relief after I chose to leave him, but I still had to deal with the aftereffects which included hostile emails and him trying to use the law to gain a financial advantage.

Be prepared for the worst but know that there is light at the end of the tunnel. You are essentially yanking a tree out from under the ground, a tree that's laid down roots and made itself too damn comfortable. Getting rid of an abuser is a task, but just understand that domestic abuse is a criminal offence in many jurisdictions. What he is doing is illegal, and you absolutely can't share the same home as him.

Don't go into this blindly, as I've mentioned above, he will try and find ways to get back into the home. The same home you made so comfortable for him. His life is about to change, and he won't want that. He'll scuffle for dear life on the day, but you must remain resolute. You have to stick to the plan. Many women sadly don't do this, and therefore, exit at step 5.

Don't forget the list you made. Don't forget the legal advice you received. If you are the first one to pull the trigger and get the desired outcome of removing him from your home, then you will have won. Don't let him be the one to turn it on you and say that your conduct is abusive, and instead he will be the one removing you from the home and you'll have an operational nightmare on your hands. Remember, you have the power because you have knowledge. Be strategic, be calm and be wise. Don't give him an opportunity to use this strategy that you so expertly crafted, against you.

When you are confronting him, you must remain calm. It's easy to get caught up in the motion of it especially if he's a yeller (and you may be too). You mustn't tell your abuser that this is a premeditated operation. If you are confronting him with knowledge of his infidelity that you became aware of nine months ago, push that date to yesterday or the day before. It must look like you've been caught off guard and you are speaking to him like you still trust him and assume that he will exercise some form of logic. Remember, he thinks you still trust him like you always have done. Use that as a weapon against him.

I'm all for "*We lived and we loved*", but not when it comes to domestic abuse. To me, it is sickening behaviour. It almost nullifies all the dreams and hope one had at the beginning of a relationship. You may find yourself asking yourself the question, "*Did he ever really love me?*" I'm not saying abusers don't have feelings, but what you must understand is that there are individuals out there who either get lost along the way or were lost to begin with. It's not your job to make sense of why abusers abuse. Now that you are in this situation, you must apply sense and reason to get out. This is not a place for weeping and wailing, this is the time to put yourself out in a way that gives you the least to emotionally contend with. This will make sense

when we reach Step 8, but what I do want to say is that the act of suppressing your feelings is not something we want to ignore at least from a mental health perspective. What you are doing requires resilience, and managing this after getting him out is essential.

Also, avoid using terms like “getting him out”. Of course I’ve titled this chapter as such solely for dramatic effect. The legal system will perhaps not view this favourably, especially if you are married and you live in your matrimonial home. There may be rules around excluding a spouse from the home, for example. Hence the importance of legal advice. Understand the implications of what you are about to do.

This process may take time, and he won’t want to leave. It will be tiring, draining, and you may be shaking the entire time whilst you are doing it. The important part however is that you remain resolute, and even though you may look afraid, your words will have impact. The fact that you have support will have impact, and he will understand that there’s no way he can get around this.

Psych yourself up to doing this, and once you do, that’s about 2/3 of the battle because you will have enacted your strategy.

STEP 6

STAY VIGILANT

Did you know that a woman's life is the most at risk during this process? You must stay vigilant.

You will undoubtedly be filing divorce proceedings and/or restraining orders to keep him away from you, but it is likely that your abuser will come back to your home to see if he can talk you back into the relationship. He will apologise, he will tell you that he loves you. You may cave and let him back in. But why waste all that work that you did to get him out? All you are doing is delaying the life that you could have, and limiting yourself to the life he is giving you (which is a pretty sh*t life if you ask me). The only person that loses in this process if you let him back into your life, is you.

A family member stayed with me during this process for six weeks. During that time, he emotionally supported me when I had my court appearance and helped me wade through the vile emails that were being sent to me. He also acted as a third party to manage my abuser making unsolicited house visits without police presence. Trust me, your abuser will try a myriad of things to get back in, and you need to be prepared for this process.

It might seem silly that you may need a chaperone to take you to places you frequent, like the gym. Your abuser will know your movements and will do his best to get you alone. You mustn't be alone. Alert your workplace as to what is happening and if you can try and work from home, that would be ideal.

A restraining order is a piece of paper by the end of the day. Even after you get it, you mustn't put yourself in situations where your abuser can confront you without you having any protection. Be sensible, be vigilant.

If you were the breadwinner, expect him to come for money. It can be anything from filing for alimony to listing out imaginary expenses to get you to pay for the lifestyle that you gave him.

You should be ready for this. Get ready for mud-flinging. He will not only try and make direct claims from you, but also because of you being related to a rich family member, for example.

You'll feel triggered and upset, but just understand that this is a part of the process. This will trigger you until you no longer must deal with him, and once you've worked past these issues in Step 8.

Are you second-guessing your decision to leave him? If you are, don't. I promise it will get better; you just need to ride the wave. You're essentially dealing with an overgrown brat, whose toys have been taken away from him. He will be vindictive, nasty and hurtful. He was always a monster, it's just that his true colours are surfacing for the world to see.

Or he could also be a smooth operator, making it look like all he's doing is claiming things that he rightfully deserved in the first place. His lawyers will make him look like a saint, and your lawyers may say he seems "remorseful". Don't be fooled, it's an act. Abusers can be the most charming of them all, and that's how they survive in the real world. A smooth exterior where everyone loves them, all the while they have a dark side that nobody knows about other than you. Trust that experience you had with him, trust your intuition and your knowledge. You know better. Don't let friends or family invalidate your experience.

Once he's out of the house, start therapy.

This may be a controversial topic for some of you, but this is crucial. You may not be ready to deal with your emotions, but you need to start examining your feelings around this. You need to come to terms with the fact that this happened to you, and you need someone to talk to about this. Someone who isn't in your circle, and someone who can objectively assess the situation and provide you with useful tools to navigate the next few years. That's right, I said years.

Did you think this would be like flicking a switch? He's out, and it's time to party? Sadly, this isn't how it works. You have just endured something that will take time to heal from. You don't even need to take therapy seriously, hell I treated it like a bit of a joke whilst I navigated Step 7! I saw my therapist as a confidante for my uncharacteristic behaviours, but the important part was that I was in therapy. Once I got on the grief curve and started working through my feelings, it was then that I realised that it was a blessing that I had a therapist ready and available to tackle these issues with me.

STEP 7

TO DATE OR NOT TO DATE?

Let me tell you a story about what happens when an unhealed woman who has just exited an abusive relationship meets an equally unhealed man.

She wasn't looking for anything permanent, just something fleeting. She wanted to forget about what her abuser did to her. She was going through an extremely difficult process trying to extricate herself from the role of being a victim of abuse, and so, she decided to join a dating website only ten days after her split and two days after she got her restraining order.

He was single with a couple of children. Divorced. Good-looking, and so, she swiped right.

And it was a match.

She decided to meet him on a Friday night without expecting anything. Race, religion, ethnicity and gender was all a blur to her. She just wanted to have fun. She no longer cared about being a good girl, and all her hang-ups around premarital sex flew right out the window. Being a good girl didn't get her anywhere, all it did was make her think that she could work on her previous relationship and that the abuse would go away, which it never did.

She met him and it felt great. It felt great to be desired, to have someone to talk to, to have someone who went through a divorce and who empathised. It turned out that he too used to be in an abusive relationship. She told him everything and didn't hold back on a single detail. She opened herself to him like a flower, and he loved it. She shared her deepest and darkest thoughts and feelings, and she felt that for the first time someone she felt seen. He showered her with compliments, and she lapped it all right up. It felt nice to be desired. She was putty in his hands.

Her family and friends were all worried about her “destructive dating”. They thought that she should heal first before putting herself out there. She felt like a hologram. Living her life constantly for others, just to please them rather than herself. She wanted to feel the rush of adrenaline and the feelings of desire. She wanted to feel alive.

She clicked with him. He seemed more intelligent than the other men she came across which was a plus. He told her that he felt the same way. She was falling so quickly. There were red-flags, but she didn’t recognise them as such. Her heart raced when they kissed for the first time. She thought it was excitement, but in fact it was anxiety.

He stirred something within her, passion, desire and most importantly, love. Was it love? At the time, she thought it was. She couldn’t have been more wrong.

She told him that she wasn’t ready to sleep with him, it had only been just a couple of weeks. He kept trying to take her clothes off, and she kept pushing him away. She had been sexually abused by her ex, and her body wasn’t ready to let another man in just yet. She told him that she needed time, and he told her that it was about trusting another man. He agreed with her.

She was drinking excessively. She was a free woman and she wanted to feel everything. They both texted each other day and night like tweens. They cuddled and kissed like high-school sweethearts, he made her feel happiness like she hadn’t before, and she clung to this feeling never wanting to let it go.

They spent New Year’s Eve together, and she told him that she trusted him. It had only been three weeks. She drank a lot of champagne, and he took her by the hand to the bedroom and they had sex for the first time. He didn’t use a condom.

What were they? Were they exclusive? She needed to feel safe, and she wanted reassurance. And so, she asked him this question in bed, and he made it perfectly clear to her that there were other women in the picture and he needed time to think about it. Her heart broke for the

second time in her life. They ended it a few days later. It had only been three weeks, but she had fallen hard.

She tried to date other people over the next few years, but he kept trying to come back into her life. He knew what to say to manipulate her, but she didn't identify it as such at the time. She thought it was passion, but it was in fact his selfishness and him wanting to have his cake and eat it.

She healed and learnt the importance of boundaries. He crossed a serious boundary when he tried kissing her whilst she was in a relationship with another man, and so she ended it with him for good this time, four years later.

This is a true story.

My hope is that no other woman should ever have to go through this. Understand that exiting an abusive relationship doesn't mean that you are stronger and are able to stand up to any manipulative narcissist, it just means that you were able to stand up to your ex.

Whilst you are going through this process, you are extremely vulnerable. Think of a human being without skin. Wouldn't you feel every gust of air? Every dust molecule? It would feel quite sensitive, wouldn't it? That's you, coming out of an abusive relationship.

Now, I perfectly understand the importance of "getting under someone to get over someone", but just hear me out on this. At this stage, you are not capable of making good decisions when it comes to love, dating and relationships. Yes, you will have started therapy by now and surely talking to others within your circle about what happened to you. This doesn't mean you've healed. You have started the process of healing, and you have a while to go.

We hear about those freak stories about people meeting "the one" right after exiting a relationship. Do we know the context of this? Was there healing and work that was done prior

to meeting that person? The standards are subjective, and what may work for one person may not necessarily work for you.

My advice is that there is no substitute for taking the time and doing therapy. There will be a lot of emotional wounds that will need healing, because you put up with certain behaviours to survive in that abusive relationship. Your standards and boundaries were either low or non-existent. Someone abused your trust and faith in them and used those very pure concepts against you. You are hurt, and you need to take the time to work on yourself.

I know this all sounds very boring but take this from someone who made those mistakes. Someone who tried to let men in to fill some kind of void within her life. My ego was shot, and I needed validation from an external source. It was only years later that I learnt that the most important validation that I needed was from myself, and not from another person.

Sometimes we need to make our own mistakes to come out the other side stronger, and it is only from those mistakes that we learn. Human beings are not perfect, and of course you will make mistakes when it comes to trusting people within your existing circle and those who wish to enter it. You have trusted your intuition to leave your abuser. You must rely on that very same intuition to make good decisions about those you let into your life.

Because you will be looking for someone to trust, as the person you once trusted betrayed that very same trust. Even if you are not consciously looking for someone to let into your life on a permanent basis, understand that you are emotionally vulnerable, and your behaviour will be extremely erratic.

There is nothing wrong with this, this is all a part of the process. This step doesn't seek to lecture, it seeks to warn women in terms of the dangers of looking to trust someone right after exiting an abusive relationship.

STEP 8

HEALING

You have had to compartmentalise your feelings, tucking away your base instincts to nurture and to be there for the person that you love. There may be remnants of feelings that you have towards him, but you've gotten him out, and surely those old feelings ought to have disappeared, right?

Wrong.

You will second-guess yourself, thinking, could I have tried harder? When did I lose him? Could I have saved him from the monster he became? The reality is, that the monster developed from a set of traumas which are quite frankly, none of your business. The responsibility that a woman has coming out of an abusive relationship, is to herself. She must ensure that she nurtures herself, keeps herself safe and puts together those pieces of her self-esteem that her abuser crushed.

Just because this is the last step in the process, doesn't make it any less important. Healing is essential. I knew I had to speak to somebody coming out of that abusive relationship. I never grew up in an environment where therapy was viewed as the norm. I grew up thinking that therapy was for the mentally ill. We have progressed so much since then, and given that we have this large amount of knowledge in the psychiatric field dealing with trauma victims, why not use it?

There may be questions that you've never really asked yourself. What are your values? What do you want out of life going forward? What type of person do you want to be? These questions were all prompted by therapy. This is a chance for you to self-assess. If you need to go through the dark night of the soul, then do that.

Nobody really talks about it, but sometimes you must break yourself down and come down to ground zero and rebuild yourself to the person you want to become. I did that, and I wouldn't give that process up for anything. Why? Because now I can live with who I am. I was able to identify indoctrinated values, those values that I wanted to keep, and others I wanted to get rid of.

To focus on picking up the pieces of your life and re-establishing yourself won't be easy, it will take courage. The reason why I know you have it in you to do this, is because you were courageous in getting him out of your life, so I know you have it in you to do this.

There will be times when you feel broken. You will feel like you are going through some form of an existential crisis where I feel like you can't recognise yourself anymore. Your grounding and your security won't feel quite the same as it used to. The reason for this is because you have brought in a massive amount of change. You have established a boundary and you have exercised it. So inevitably, everything will feel uncomfortable. Change requires discomfort, if you cling to the status quo, this process won't feel as comfortable. But the best part about this change, is that you are now free.

You may have personal views on therapy. That it's self-indulgent. That it's too expensive. And why go to therapy when you have a great support network, right? The difference between therapy and your friends and family is that you will need an objective viewpoint in terms of what you've been through. You will need to process the trauma and feel like you can freely express yourself.

Apart from having a therapist, you may want to hire a life-coach. I remembered working with a life coach at work, as part of a training session on emotional intelligence. She was a woman of colour like me, and I really liked her. I forgot about all my career aspirations prior to my breakup, and I wanted to get back on track. The thing about being in an abusive relationship,

is that it will inevitably impact different areas of your life. It was only after coming out of an abusive relationship that I realised that my work relationships were toxic.

I neither felt valued nor appreciated at work, I felt tolerated. Being in an abusive relationship exacerbated the harshness of my reality, and I remember that I would very often feel myself spiralling. Having a life coach meant that I was able to articulate what I wanted from my career and take charge of that. I was also able to reframe that I was not a victim of abuse. That I was not just a survivor, that I was a thriver.

There will be days when you come home feeling so mentally drained. Dealing with a breakup, whether a divorce court is involved or not, is rough. There will be days where you don't want to leave your home. You may feel like you want to retreat and not have to deal with anybody because you feel like they don't understand you or what you've been through. This is all normal, and you may not feel like you want to be proactive about either therapy or life-coaching. But there will come a time where you will want to make your life better. Why? Because you fought for this life. You fought to leave him, and you succeeded. Why become bitter when you can become better?

Life-coaching helped me put everything into perspective. If I could compare it to therapy, it felt more action-oriented in a tangible way versus therapy. It also served as an accountability mechanism.

It was only through therapy and life-coaching that I jumped onto the grief curve. Grieving the loss of someone I thought was my best friend and someone I thought who had my back. I was also grieving the loss of a life that I wanted for myself. I was alone again, and I was struggling with the echoes of the voices in my head that were bouncing off the sides and reverberating in my heart. I have told you to put aside your emotions to be able to be strong for yourself and for your children if you have any. You may still be fighting for custody, or going through a divorce, but now is the time to sit with yourself and come to terms with the fact that you have

your life ahead of you. Now is the time to start thinking about the type of life you want, what you want to achieve and experience. If you are still fighting the good fight to keep him out of your life and end ties with him for good, keep fighting. But you need to be talking to someone objectively about all of this. If you don't and you run from your feelings, you are just pushing all that trauma under the carpet, creating another type of monster. You may also have a complete breakdown, and to avoid that, you need to keep processing your emotions and trauma.

You see the thing with trauma is this, is that when it happens, we don't completely process it. Objectively it is happening to us, and one would think that our brains are processing it. It was only after completing EMDR, which is a special type of therapy to process trauma, that I understood that each abusive act put me into a state of hypervigilance, and I wasn't processing any of what was happening to me. I was just trying to survive.

I used therapy and life-coaching to work on myself, and rediscover who I was as a person. When doctrine becomes unhealthy, is when you start judging yourself harshly by a set of perfect principles that you can't feasibly live up to. I realised that not only was my abuser using the same judgment to abuse me, but it also triggered off unhealthy internal conversations within myself. And in the end, I judged myself harshly. For instance, does premarital sex make me a sinner? According to most of the Abrahamic texts, it does. Is this the kind of thing I want to be telling myself on the regular? No. So guess what, I threw that belief out of the window. Since I let go of the reigns, I felt at peace. Choosing my mental health above all else was key going forward, and religion would be a useful tool and/or a resource, but I wouldn't let it rule my life.

When you are healing, the experiences, and interactions you have with people around you will change. Your friend group may become smaller, but at the same time you will have encounters with different people which will feel new. Why? Because you are working on yourself. See it as you are wiping down a foggy set of lenses. You will be getting more clarity every single

day, which is the good news. Don't run from doing the work. Spend time getting to know yourself. Now I'm not saying you won't be exposed to negative sorts of people. You might still be going through a bitter divorce which means you are still exposed to nasty correspondence from your abuser, but that doesn't mean that things in your life won't change.

Your abuser won't like not having access to you because being abusive validates their point of view, which is that they are better than you. Abuse confirms their ego, and if there's one thing we know, men (and abusers) love their egos. Therefore, going through a bitter split and healing can be done in tandem, but only one of them will have permanence in your life, and that is the latter.

After you have severed ties with your ex (or limited interactions with him if there is a custody arrangement in place), it's like flicking a switch right? All that work you did on yourself and all that freedom, surely means that you'd automatically feel better?

Wrong.

The most difficult part of my healing journey was after I had gotten my abuser out of my life for good. I found myself ruminating on the same sorts of questions. Will I make the same mistakes again? Will I ever be happy again? Why has my life turned out this way? Was I being punished for something that I had done unintentionally? Had I caused someone so much pain that it came back around to bite me in the ass? What did I ever do to deserve this?

Are you finding yourself triggered by abusive conduct? Or anything that really reminds you of your last relationship? This is normal. You should speak to your therapist about dealing with these specifically, as there are certain methods in therapy that will help you deal with triggers by processing trauma. The important part is acknowledging and accepting that you are triggered, being mindful of the conduct that comes from it, feeling what you are meant to feel and allowing it to pass. When you sit in your feelings for a while and allow the negativity to whirl around you like a hot suffocating steam, that is when it becomes unhelpful.

You will never be the same again after your breakup, but it is ok. You must learn to exercise kindness not just to yourself, but to others. You were put on this planet for a reason, and you will search for that purpose every single day. It's ok to not know all the answers. It's ok to have sad days and hole yourself in your bedroom while sipping on a chocolate milkshake and eating churros. It's ok to be human.

Focusing on healing will give you perspective on the importance of walking away from your abuser and why you did it. It will give you a fresh pair of lenses to work with. There are no limits placed upon you, and because you have boundaries that you've worked on, you won't let the same thing happen again. A few years later, and I'm still healing. When the memories come back when I'm alone in my bed, I go into a foetal position as if to protect my essential organs from a threat that my mind remembers but is no longer there. Take the time to heal and acknowledge that it isn't a linear process.

It took courage to walk away, but to be honest with you, I haven't felt this happy in a long time. I have grown into a better version of myself. Leaving an abusive relationship isn't easy, it's hard.

The easiest thing to do isn't always the right thing to do, and I'm glad that I persevered and left my abuser as I'm no longer living half of a life.