

Domestic violence - It takes more than courage to 'get out'

By Erin Handley

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SAFE: One local woman shares her story about breaking the shackles of domestic violence. Photo: Barry Smith 211114BSF03

THOUGH she had been tangled in a web of manipulative abuse at the hands of her former partner, Kate* counts herself as one of the lucky ones. She was able to get out, and she hasn't looked back. "The first two months were perfect – it was a normal, happy relationship," Kate said. But then the manipulation started, subtle but insidious. "He started to keep me away from my family and my friends. He started hiding my keys and taking my money," she said. "I wasn't allowed to wear certain things – I couldn't wear make-up, I couldn't wear my hair in a bun, it had to be down all the time. "He would shove and push me, and he wouldn't take no for an answer when it came to sex."

Like many women entrapped in domestic violence, Kate thought this behaviour was normal. She is just one of many women who have been caught in the throes of domestic violence sweeping the region. According to Tamworth Family Support Services worker Min Currell, eight out of 10 women return to an abusive, intimate relationship. She said it is not simple for women to "just leave" – not only because they psychologically started to believe the toxic things their perpetrators told them, but also because they were tied to the relationship because of children, finances and intimacy. "These women actually love these men," Ms Currell said.

Kate's mother had lived domestic violence herself – she knew the traits and would ask Kate about the abuse she sensed. “I would never admit to it,” Kate said. “I would get angry and go home. I was ashamed. I thought it was right, but obviously it was wrong.”

She remained in the abusive relationship for almost a year, in part because she had fallen pregnant. “I didn't want my baby to grow up without a father, but I thought ‘My son shouldn't be witnessing that violence’, so I had to get out.” She broke it off and was shocked to return to the house only two hours after their split to find he had taken everything – her bed, her food, her pet bird. “I had no money, no food, I had nothing left to my name,” Kate said. Kate stayed at the house and only recently paid off all the debts he left behind. “I hated staying there of a night by myself,” she said.

She said he had a key and could come back at any time. “I started realising things were being stolen – clothes, ultrasound photos. I'd come home and they were gone.” After the break up, she spoke to her older sister, a youth worker who recommended she go to the Salvos and the Women's Refuge for help. “I didn't think I could do it, I thought I would go back to him, but stories I heard from my mum and the refuge gave me a lot of strength,” Kate said.

Staff at Tamworth Family Support Services helped her find a new place to call home three months ago. Kate's advice to women in the grip of domestic violence is not as simple as “get out” – she knows just how hard it can be to leave. “You need to have courage and support from people who actually care,” she said. She urged women to reach out to the Women's Refuge or to a police officer. “There is help out there if they need it,” she said.

*“Kate” is a pseudonym to protect her identity.