

Leaving:

Interviews with women who have left
abusive relationships

a study by

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Introduction

You need to get out, but how? Many things surround the issue of leaving an abusive partner – not knowing where to go, how to access support and much more. I thought there needed to be more information on what it is really like to live with abuse and to leave. This is what I am hoping to give you.

I wrote this publication to tell my story of leaving abuse and the lessons learned from the nine women I interviewed. I did all this during a short five-week job placement through the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG). I was enrolled in ORCA, the job-training program at Esquimalt Neighbourhood House when I phoned VIPIRG asking for experience being a researcher. When they told me to choose a subject that was close to me, something based on my own experience I knew this is what I wanted to do. Over the month I worked with the staff at VIPIRG to conduct the interviews and write this report. I hope it can help others.

If you, or someone you know, needs help to leave an abusive relationship there are people and places to help - call them. You can call 911 or just look at the first page in your phone book for the phone number of a transition house in your area.

Methodology

In this report you will read about nine women who I interviewed, and I will also tell you my story and thoughts. We are all women who have been abused, and who have left. Before I started interviewing, the Researcher at VIPIRG assisted me in creating consent forms and an interview guide. Finding the women was easy, they are all friends or women I have meet in my job training program.

The nine women come from a variety of backgrounds and different cultures. Their ages range from twenty-four to forty-one years old. They are all mothers, most having one or two school age children. While one woman is working full-time, the other women's income is social assistance or disability. Five of the women graduated from high school and four had completed grade eleven. All the women live in poverty.

Their abusive relationships were between one and a half years to thirteen years in duration. Some were married some not, one was abused by her pimp/boyfriend. And now some are single, others in new relationships, none are remarried. Some of the women smoke pot, some have piercings in different places, and some seem like the girl next door, yet they all have a commonality that links us together. Some of these women show great strength and I look up to them with great respect. Others still seem at odds with who they are and their place in this world.

I am extremely thankful for their time and openness for all of us to see. Now, after interviewing these women and writing this report, I feel I am making a contribution to helping other women.

Angela's story

I was living common law with my ex for just over a year when he snapped one day over a discussion about buying a home and beat me black and blue. My surrogate mother made me call the police. A report was made and he was escorted out. Not long after he moved out. It was hell. I couldn't sleep, eat, anything. My sister had to hold me so I could sleep. Pain is in my heart as I recall those days. He moved out, but the abuse became worse, and he became more controlling. Not until I truly moved away did I become free. Even then, for almost a year after he still tried to control me by phone. I bought into it, and would sit there shaking, crying on the phone, and hating it all. After seven years I told

him no more and stuck by it. Seven years is a long time in one's life.

I had no idea of where to go. The police seemed anything but helpful. I let my children see the abuse, and excused it. My son would hold me at three years of age and tell me "it is okay Mommy, Daddy is gone he can't hurt you any more." My children became the adults of the relationship. Children, whether they are also being hit, yelled at, or put down, are also victims, small-unheard victims. The behaviour becomes a part of them. I had to give up my son to my sister because I could not handle his anger. It became a battle of wills, me against him. Our relationship will never be the same.

It's hard to leave...

Many women, for one reason or another, are in abusive relationships. From young to old we can all be affected. Any ethnicity, rich or poor, it reaches into the lives of all. If you think you are somehow immune to abuse, you are wrong. It can touch anyone at any time in any way. And believe me getting out is not easy to do. Some stay for years before they leave. Some are forced to leave, and some never leave. Many just finally had had enough while others do it more for their children. Whatever the reason, it is so much easier to say than to do. I talked to nine other women who left because I wanted to know what it was like for other women when they were trying to leave.

"It was scary to be by myself at night," one woman said. Another woman said, "the hardest thing about leaving him was leaving everything behind, including my pets." It is hard enough to try to go out in this world alone when you have low self-esteem and don't know where to start, leaving your stuff behind and starting from nothing makes it even harder. Some of the women I talked to were financially dependent on their ex making it harder to leave. Many women agreed that they feared not being able to make it on their own, and of being alone. They were fed words of discouragement by their ex partners, and had a hard time erasing the tapes of negativity from their minds.

The fear of leaving can be overwhelming. There is so much to consider. You may think you need time, but I can tell you from my own experience that waiting won't change much of anything. The sooner you leave and get out on your own the sooner life will begin to take on a sunny disposition. I won't lie, leaving can be very painful. At first it may seem like you are in a personal hell, but with time you will look back and see it was the best time to leave.

Angela...

I remember many times trying to leave. Then fear filled me, and I would hear his words of discouragement in my head. I did not want to lose my kids, and my support cheques. I feared his retaliation. I wanted someone; to be alone was too much. I would cry at the thought of having to leave and be alone. "No one will ever want you. You are nothing but a bitch. I am the best you will ever get. I will never approve of anyone you see." His words rang through me. I guess this is what kept me there and eventually what helped me to leave.

finally left and moved across an ocean from him. I finally had something inside of me say, "you can do this, go while you can." Yet even as I left I cried. The freedom was painful, it took over a year for me to heal. I had never felt so alone and misunderstood. I wish I had known of more places I could have gone to get help through those times.

I asked the woman what they would like to tell others who are still in abusive relationships. This is what some of them had to say:

I left my ex a few times before I

What women who have left want to tell women being abused is...

- "Go to the police, make a record. If you fear for your life get a protective order."
- "Remember that you count. No matter what the man says you do count. You are not alone!"
- "Learn to network."
- "Get professional help. I grew up in a real abusive home, didn't know I was abused."
- "Don't get sucked in to the con artist."
- "Don't blame yourself. Let you be number one."
- "Get out, it can be done. I know when you're there you don't believe that, but you can."

Sometimes it takes more than one try...

I was happy to find that many of the women never returned to their abusive relationship. Yet there were some that did. Why, I asked. "Because he made all these promises." "I thought I could change him!" more than one woman answered, obviously not an uncommon occurrence. Other common answers were "I didn't think I could do any better" and "I thought I was in love." For all the women who returned, the relationship fell apart and the abuse became much worse.

Why do men abuse us?

What the women thought the reasons were ranged from: drinking, drugs, pregnancy, to jealousy over the kids, upbringing was blamed, the way they were parented, even one who felt she was the rightful property of her pimp. None of which are acceptable reasons for abuse. Remember, there is no excuse for abuse.

Angela...

My ex became abusive the same day I first found out I was pregnant. He punched me in the stomach. Other men had hit me many times before, but he seemed so perfect. When he apologized profusely I was okay. Hey, I got roses and cards. For a while this went on. I was unsure, I had been taught to stick by the relationship no matter what. I figured once baby was born that he would be okay. I was wrong, it got worse. Eventually there were no

more roses or cards, then no more apologies. He began to blame me. I thought I could change, and make him happy.

Out of desperation at five months pregnant, I attempted suicide. Taking over a hundred pills I came close to ending it all. Again my surrogate mother was the one to find me and take me to the hospital. As they tried to pump my stomach I kept pulling out the tubes; I wanted

it all to end. He didn't care; he never came to the hospital, or even called. In fact I was more upset because no one would tell me where he was. Once baby was born I let him walk all over me. I was at a loss of how to go on alone. No one would want someone with two kids. As the kids

got older, the abuse grew harder, he would drag my kids from bed to upset me and shame me. The kids were definitely a sore spot for our relationship. But I thought if I loved him enough and our child enough it would change. It never did.

Getting help to get out...

Many women don't know where to turn to get help when they want to leave. Out of the nine women I interviewed only three women knew of services to contact when they most needed them. One woman said "I was unaware of any services until I did volunteer work, then I got private counselling." Which I would like to add, she had to pay for herself with child tax credit money, which somehow seems wrong to me. The women who did know of services knew of the police, two knew of transition houses, and one knew of a military padre. At some point, these women did find out about services to help. However, they traveled a long road, a road that I feel needed more options, or possibly just more information on the options available. My want is for there to be recognition of the lack of publicity in places to go in crisis. We can help stop the violence by opening up everyone's eyes to these services and stop condoning abuse in society.

Although many women related their very negative experiences with the police, only the police have the ability to take the abuser away, giving you time to get out, plus creating a record and providing victim services. "They don't tell ya nothing, there is no justice system" was the comment of one woman. Yet there were a couple of women who found them to be very helpful. Some women would like to see them get better sensitivity training, to better understand and help women in abusive circumstances. It was mentioned a few times though that the police were an essential tool in getting a protective order and also to have a record. In the end, no matter what is said, the police are of a great value to victims of abuse.

As for the Ministry for Children and Families, only a couple of women commented on them, and they were not positive comments, however, their involvement was because their children were apprehended. Finally transition houses, I was surprised to discover that many women knew nothing about transition houses when they were leaving their relationship. Yet the ones who did go to a transition house found it very helpful. In fact, the number one recommendation from these women was they would like to see more transition houses and more advertising, education and accessibility to transition houses and other programs for women who are leaving.

Angela...

I laugh when I think about my experience with the police. They were so casual and aloof about everything. When my partner threatened to slash my throat, and admitted it to the police, they said he was very calm and believed he would not hurt me. Why? Because he is an excellent actor and was calm in saying he would kill me? In my many dealings with the police I have to admit, I was anything but satisfied with their part in all of it. Through their ignorance he went on to make it a joke. Even my kids thought you could get away from the police by being innocent enough.

I too was involved with the Ministry for Children and Families. I have to say I was both happy and disappointed with their services. I found it pretty much took someone reporting you to them, before they will help. A transition house was not an option for me because of the

many negative stories I had heard about them. Now I know differently, I have seen the help they were able to provide for women. They allowed the women I talked to become stronger, and helped them to get set up from the ground up.

As I said before, it took me another year of being alone to finally begin to grow into my own. If it seems like the pain will never end, it will. I have a journal that I write in always. I would recommend this to anyone, being able to look back and see where you were, and where you've come can be of great assistance.

Having been out on my own, I have come to know of many services, and benefited from being involved in them. I agree with the one woman who said, "as many people as you can tell the better." By knowing what services do exist and how we can better improve them, we are making

huge strides in the fight against abuse. I think, who better to know what needs to be changed, than those of us who have been there?

I know that many women suffer from the effects of their abuse even years after they have left. They still fear being put down, hit, etc. We come to expect it after years of having been there. I still jump when someone comes from behind. I still flinch when someone moves too fast

or unexpectedly. An example of this would be, one night while in bed with a lover, he went to kiss me. My reaction was to jump, and burst into tears. His fast movement made me think he was going to hit me. He was shocked to say the least and explained he would never hit me; he only wanted to kiss me. This is an example of how even after you leave the protective measures once needed before stay with you.

Life after we leave...

All nine women I interviewed are now working on either further education or their career. They say they now feel more independent and free. Some comments were:

- "I now have the courage to do things myself."
- "I am quite happy. Don't have a job yet, but I can smell one."
- "Got my power back! I'm in a relationship where I can express my emotions openly."
- "I'm still hesitant about men, my life though is 100% better than it was."
- "I can do what I put my mind to-thanks to 'Bridges'."
- "I'm working on my career and I'm going to do it!"
- "Great! I'm positive and don't allow abuse near me any more."

Afterword

As for my life at this time, I am twenty-six years old, single and not sure I want to change that. I still have a lot of apprehension when it comes to men. I fear retaliation. I am learning everyday to be a better parent. My son and I have lost an important part of our relationship that can never be replaced. Yet as each day goes on I am thankful that he still loves me and calls me mom (although at this time, he also calls his aunt mom, so it is something I struggle with, and hope to one day accept). My daughters are everything to me. They grow up so fast, and I feel pain, and fear of once again being truly alone. I hope that in time being alone will not seem so bad.

I am on medication for my depression and it has been three years since I last attempted suicide. I will have been sober a year in July and this too is a struggle. I have become stronger with every course I take, and every friend I make. I journal everyday, and at times go back and read the past. I can then see how far I really have come. I do struggle with obsession compulsion, but am working to alleviate this.

I have a small group of friends, many who have been in the same sort of situations. In fact they are many of the woman that I interviewed. As one becomes involved in support programs, you develop strong emotional ties and friendships to those who have also been in your circumstances. My relationships with past friends are not there so much any more. As you leave the abuse, you come to recognize that some friendships could be contributing factors. I want to have nothing to do with negativity. I have enough negativity in myself, that I need not have it with others.

I feel that I still have much growth and strength to get back. But just as it took years of abuse to lose my strength, it will take years to regain. I live for today, and try not to worry about tomorrow. My philosophy is baby steps. Where there is a will, there will surely always be a way.

I am entering college in the fall. Sociology will be my focus; my area of interest is women and children. Give back to the community what it gave to you, and you will benefit many rewards is what I believe. I hope to continue studies at University of Victoria and do my major in sociology. I want personally to make a

difference. I am happy despite the many bumps in my road. I continue to learn, and will continue to grow.

Writing this report has been much harder than I had first anticipated. Talking to others and hearing their stories was easy; however, going back and reliving my pain was hard and exhausting. Yet I feel that one can only truly understand if you can see where I am coming from. I would like to see that all services are available to anyone who needs them and that they can easily find those services. By writing our story I hope that this will be a step in that direction.



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