

## Questionnaire on exiting your abusive relationship:

Please return this completed questionnaire to [REDACTED] by 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2024.

*This study is for women in particular who have experienced coercive control in an intimate relationship and have exited this relationship. By filling in this form you agree for your de-identified story to be used in both the Housing Proposal and the Royal Commission. We may quote some of your sentences, or we may compile and paraphrase everyone's shared experiences. Your questionnaire will be attached as an appendix to both the Royal Commission submission and the Housing Proposal. People viewing the Royal Commission submission and the Housing Proposal will be politicians, funding bodies, the In2Life Board and the Steering Committee for the housing project. If we decide to share your story wider than this we will refer back to you for further permission.*

**Please let me know if you wish to adjust/withdraw permission for any of these uses. Please also take care of yourself when you revisit your story – plan something kind for yourself post-questionnaire. If you need support please let me know.**

**Thank you for sharing your story – it may help many others.**

1. At what age did you exit the abusive relationship? And how long were you in it for?

I was 44 years old when I left the abusive relationship and I was in this one for 4 years.

2. Can you describe how you felt:

- a. During the abusive relationship

This is a difficult one to describe as it was unusual. Being psychologically abusive, emotionally abusive, financially abusive, sexually abusive, spiritually abusive was completely different to the extreme physical and verbal abuse that I had gone through before. This relationship definitely had physical and verbal abuse also but in an entirely different way. It was still abuse, just with a different face on it.

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I would have to say that I felt confused during this relationship. I was trying to work out what I was doing or saying that might have been wrong for him to behave the way he did, I was so hurt because I felt like he wasn't happy with me for who I was, I had to be someone else. I found this confusing. There were times of course where I felt like he loved me, but then as quick as I felt that, was as quick as he stripped it all away by something else that he would do to hurt me. Nothing made sense and I was just left confused by the whole ordeal.

b. When you decided to leave

I felt afraid that he would find out I was planning to leave, afraid that he wouldn't let me go if he did, afraid that I would have to start all over again with absolutely nothing and afraid of people's judgement.

c. As you were leaving

I felt afraid and distressed yet at the same time filled with adrenaline that I was finally doing something to change it.

d. Directly after you left

I felt afraid, lonely, weak, vulnerable, hurt, broken, distressed, traumatised. I still have waves of these wounds which abuse inflicts on the soul.

3. How long did it take you to heal/get your life sorted after you were no longer under the same roof?

It has been three years now since I have left. I am still working through things. I am still on the journey to recovery and healing. I still have trauma responses and triggers that I have to work through on a regular basis.

Financially, I was left with nothing but debt. I didn't have the strength to fight for any real finances from out of the home, so I settled with a meagre \$7,000 otherwise he was going to make the divorce harder for me to get. I was blackmailed out of my rightful finances by his lawyer and I was so angry at the legal system for their failure to protect and assist abuse victims. The system failed.

I thought that when the courts saw what he had offered me (the \$7k) to settle that they would not deem it as fair and equitable, especially since I had all the banking transactions that demonstrated I paid the mortgage on my own for approximately a year and a half while he was on stress leave, covid leave and every other type of leave., but they didn't. They just let it go through and I did not have the strength to fight to get my funds given back.

He has been left with an asset worth approximately \$660,000 (It was worth \$390k when I moved in) (I personally invested in renovations at the home which increased the value by about \$80,000 and as time progressed the value increased again by another \$120,000 just because of the market) and I have nothing except for a \$40,000 debt and a rental property at \$480 per week, which is set to rise this month to \$520 per week. I cannot get that small debt down as the cost of living is too high and due to being sick for the past three years, I have incurred a lot of specialist appointments and medical treatments. The sickness I know is due to

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prolonged ongoing stress from all the abuse sustained. People just like me are victims of crime, but no one recognises abuse victims as such (as it is usually done in secret) and we don't have the strength to fight.

Coming out of over 27 years of abuse, I have hardly any superannuation, no savings and no home and I am almost 50 years old. I don't want to be left picking up cans when I am older.

The system needs to be changed including our divorce process for abuse victims. To wait 12 months and 1 day is hell on earth for an abuse victim especially when they feel like they are trying to escape a hell on earth already. There should be special leniency for this as abuse victims are then abused all over again through 'system abuse' as their abusers use the system to continue to control them.

What services did you engage with that were helpful? Why?

None this time around. I refuse to go to women's shelters where people are broken and miserable. I didn't feel it would be a safe place for my children or me. I didn't want to be surrounded by people that I didn't even know. The thought of it is frightening, which causes further feelings of fear and insecurity. Abuse victims just want the fear to stop.

After the first relationship, I had sought the help of the Northern Domestic Violence Centre and they were kind and helpfully encouraging in teaching me about the 'red flags' to look out for the next time. But, it obviously didn't work to well, because I ended up in this next abusive relationship.

I needed shelter, stability, security, support and safety. The 5 S's.

I really needed a shelter (my own safe place). Second Bite was providing my food each week. I am so thankful for that not-for-profit group.

4. What services did you engage with that were not helpful? Why?

None this time around. I didn't trust anyone.

5. Do you have any suggestions for new or better service provision for women exiting abusive relationships? (what would have helped you to better navigate this really difficult time in your life?)

If I had shelter that was my own space, that was more of a recovery retreat (holiday unit or tiny home) this would have been far more healing and beneficial to me. More support with setting up my own place and getting back on my feet financially. People that assist with finance or advocating for me to be able to get given the finance I was owed back. Change the divorce waiting periods for divorce for abuse victims. The system is old

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and outdated and due for a review of the family laws in relation to divorce terms. A long time ago, people only had to say 'I divorce you', now we have to give our abusers another year and a half to two years of our lives as we are still joined by a piece of paper. This is wrong in the case of abuse victims, but fully understand the 12 months of time for non-victims as it does give the person time to reconsider their choices....but then again, if they get divorced and then reconsider, they can always remarry anyway. Everybody's situation should be treated individually, not collectively. You cannot treat the minority the same way as the majority.

6. Can you give an idea of the financial hardship you experienced due to leaving the abusive relationship?  
Immeasurable. I still cannot get out of debt. I owe a mere \$40,000 that I cannot pay and it effects every day of my life. If I didn't have to make these continual payments, I could start saving for a house. If what I paid into the house was given back with some increase due to the increase in the value of the home, I could have cleared all these up and maybe paid my rent 1 year in advance to give me a financial reprieve.
7. Did you experience homelessness or were you at risk of homelessness due to leaving the abusive relationship?  
No, as I had some lovely friends that offered me a place to stay. But it easily could have gone that way. If I don't keep working now, I definitely wouldn't be able to afford where I live and I would be homeless unless someone offers me a place to stay.
8. How did you solve your housing issue?  
I stayed with a friend for months until I was finally approved for a rental property (only through the kindness of a realtor who helped me personally).
9. Do you have any other comments? (Maybe barriers that kept you from leaving?)  
The fear of not being able to do it on my own, or to afford anything I needed was a big barrier. It was a horrible place to be in and the financial and emotional state it left me in was completely ravished, desolate, traumatised and broken. As I mentioned above, I still have moments of traumatised grieving due to the loss.

If I had any influence in being able to see something changed for the better, it is amending the family laws on divorce terms for genuine and proven abuse victims. They are traumatised enough and making them wait 12 months and one day and then a further 12 weeks for a hearing which sometimes gets adjourned to a further date, this is further traumatising abuse victims that just need to escape and for their own sanity, as quickly as possible, as it is a tormenting process for a victim. I worried about what if I had died before I got free. Noone should have the power to play with people's time like this. Time is precious....and we cannot get it back.

Less abusive victims would go back to the abuse if they had the right supports, but they don't. It's just a lot of big words from big companies getting big government grants.

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Questions? Would you like more information about the Housing Proposal or to be more involved in it? Let me know.

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**1. At what age did you exit the abusive relationship? And how long were you in it for?**

I have been in a few abusive relationships. Sadly it's been a pattern throughout most of my life to be honest, however for the purpose of this questionnaire I will focus on the person I came to Australia with, . I was 25 when I left him, I was in it for 4 years, from the age of 21.

**2. Can you describe how you felt:**

- a. **During the abusive relationship - controlled, isolated, he took** me from my family and friends and didn't like me making new friends, I had to walk on eggshells the tiniest thing I said or did would set him off... Scared of him, but he also managed to make me feel like I needed him in some way as I didn't have anyone else...
- b. **When you decided to leave** - I had started to work in a new job and I felt strong enough through the friends I had met to leave him... The abuse had become very frequent and very bad
- c. **As you were leaving** - I felt I needed protection from him so I engineered it to move in with a bigger and stronger man... he was just a friend though,
- d. **Directly after you left** - slightly more liberated but the pattern of abuse was so familiar to me and of course he wouldn't allow me any of my possessions so I had to maintain contact with him.



**3. How long did it take you to heal/get your life sorted after you were no longer under the same roof?**

I quickly moved on into another relationship where sadly the pattern wasn't a lot different... *what about from G\_\_\_ (most recent)?* I'm feeling like I'm just coming out of it now. I was diagnosed with severe depression. After 2 years it feels like, finally, for the first time in my life I've discovered who I am. I'm just starting to walk into my power – and I'm 62! I didn't live with G\_\_\_\_. I've had my unit for 8 years.... It's the one I got after leaving my husband. Getting my unit has given me a basis and security.

**4. What services did you engage with that were helpful? Why?**

I didn't, I just did it alone - when the pattern of abuse started I was only in my 20s... I just didn't think of it. Someone suggested in more recent times that I go to a shelter and I said "No fucking way, I'm not that bad." I was too proud and fierce. I relied on friends.

**5. What services did you engage with that were not helpful? Why? NA**

**6. Do you have any suggestions for new or better service provision for women exiting abusive relationships? (what would have helped you to better navigate this really difficult time in your life?)**

I should have really sought professional help. We are talking almost 40 years ago so probably wasn't that much around then that I was aware of. I was in a pattern of fending for myself. I had a fierce faith that everything would work out. I've always worked – I've been self-employed and employed.

**7. Can you give an idea of the financial hardship you experienced due to leaving the abusive relationship?**

I had to start over again... I only really started accumulating super in my 60s. I have about \$10k in super. I'm still paying my unit off. I probably have about \$150k equity. I don't have any kids to support.

**8. Did you experience homelessness or were you at risk of homelessness due to leaving the abusive relationship?**

Yes, I relied on new acquaintances to help me out... Recently I was actually in the same situation, I was forced to live alone in a terrible house (it was in ruins, unsafe, and a fire hazard, and I felt alone and vulnerable – no support network as it was a different area than I was used to living in)... my ex-husband had kept all my money I had lent him until I signed legal documents that protected his finances, that was a messy time. It was just a few years ago... I couch surfed and rented until I got my money from him to buy this unit I have now.

**9. How did you solve your housing issue?**

In my first situation I moved into a flat with friends, but as previously stated I relied on friends help.

**10. Do you have any other comments? (eg. what barriers kept you from leaving in the first place?)**

Fear, isolation, financial issues...

It's a funny thing remembering this, I have many more horrible situations I could probably share about 4 stories like that with you, all much the same to be honest!!!

## Questionnaire on exiting domestic violence:

Please return this completed questionnaire to [REDACTED] by 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2024.

*This study is for women in particular who have experienced coercive control in an intimate relationship and have exited this relationship. By filling in this form you agree for your de-identified story to be used in both our Transitional Supportive Housing Proposal and the Royal Commission. We may quote some of your sentences, or we may compile and paraphrase everyone's shared experiences. Your questionnaire will be attached as an appendix to both the Royal Commission submission and the Housing Proposal. People viewing the Royal Commission submission and the Housing Proposal will be politicians, funding bodies, the In2Life Board and the Steering Committee for the Housing Proposal. If we decide to share your story wider than this we will refer back to you for further permission.*

**Please let me know if you wish to adjust/withdraw permission for any of these uses. Please also take care of yourself when you revisit your story – plan something kind for yourself post-questionnaire. If you need support please let me know. Please note, “coercive control”, “domestic violence” and “abusive relationship” are seen as interchangeable for the purposes of this questionnaire.**

**Thank you for sharing your story – it may help many others.**

1. **At what age did you exit the abusive relationship?** I left in 2009. I was 40yo.

And how long were you in it for? 9 years

2. **Can you describe how you felt:**

a. During the abusive relationship

Less than a dog, confused, wrong, fearful, riled, alone, betrayed, cheated, walking on eggshells all the time, very alone, not understood or heard, traumatised, exhausted and very alone.

b. When you decided to leave

Adrenalized, terrified, even more alone, wronged, confused, lost, worried, like a hunted rabbit

c. As you were leaving

Like a hunted rabbit, adrenalized to the max, confused, desperate for help, traumatised, a little bit determined, scared.

d. Directly after you left

So traumatised that, for many weeks after, the people I lived with said I looked like a robot when tending to my child. Confused, unsure, wondering if I'd done the wrong thing and if I should go back. Doubting myself and unsure of every decision I made. Terrified that I would be found. Battling his words in my head and not knowing what to believe. Exhausted (I had chronic fatigue) to the point that I could barely walk. Unable to trust almost anyone from my "past". Misunderstood. Judged.

Determined to make a better life for my daughter and keep her safe. Like a hunted rabbit. In shock.

**3. How long did it take you to heal/get your life sorted after you were no longer under the same roof?**

To be honest, I'm still healing. It's been 15 years and I'm now happily remarried. However, sometimes the chronic fatigue flares up again (when I'm under stress). I also have panic attacks on average once/week. I occasionally feel triggered by things. I've found it really difficult and draining to revisit my past in order to answer this questionnaire and write the Royal Commission submission. In writing the submission I realised that although I've forgotten him and forgiven him (still, I never want to see him again, and never want to speak his name), I still hold deep, angry grudges against the judges, the family assessor and the uneducated counsellor I encountered. All of these services that were supposedly for our good instead impacted our lives in calamitous ways.

**4. What services did you engage with that were helpful? Why?**

I know this is not every woman's experience by a long way, but my experience with the police – both in South Australia and [REDACTED] – was quite good. In South Australia, my first interaction with police was when I carefully drove in to the police station, not being able to see properly through my windscreen because he'd smashed it. I didn't turn up there for relationship advice – I just hoped they'd be able to point me in the right direction for the vehicle damage ... as I was driving illegally due to the poor visibility, but would not be able to get it repaired immediately given our current state of crisis. The policeman handed me a brochure all about domestic violence and I read it in shock, realising that it described my situation perfectly. This brochure (created by Southern Domestic Violence Action Group) proved to be an extremely useful resource, with lots of good examples and explanations. The police in [REDACTED] were also helpful for pointing me in the right direction for an intervention order.

The DV services I engaged with were all very helpful. I was most grateful for the two services I engaged with ([REDACTED] and SA). They provided me with good advice and some opportunities for group activities – all of which facilitated healing and a pathway forward. I wanted to take my case worker home in my pocket, I was so alone apart from her. I did ring the 1800Respect number once. They were pretty good. I didn't ask for a lot of advice though. They said "go to [REDACTED] if this is where you can get safe accommodation and sort it all out later" basically.

The Salvos will forever have my gratitude. When I arrived in our "new town" and new home we knew no one except the people we were renting from. They gave me credit for public phone booths and furniture (including

new single beds and mattresses) for no charge. We just “shopped” through their op shop and got what we needed.

There were a couple of other op shops that gave us clothes and children’s toys.

A chiropractor I saw paid for a year’s membership with the RAA for me. I was incredibly grateful.

**5. What services did you engage with that were not helpful? Why?**

A local church gave us a Christmas hamper. They made a big deal about it, but having someone else decide what my child should get for Christmas didn’t really work for us. I ended up finding some children’s toys and furniture dumped on the side of the road and I repainted a little toy box for [REDACTED] for that Christmas. The church (which we attended) wasn’t particularly understanding of our situation. I think they assumed that we were as well appointed and connected as they were. They had no grid for how desperate our level of lack was. They were not there for us much of the time.

Lawyers and legal advice ended up being not particularly helpful. One legal aid person said I didn’t need to worry about turning up in court as I could just say I was unwell. Then, when the court proceedings took place the lawyer tried to call me and couldn’t get through as they failed to call me on the number that I recommended would have reception. This looked bad and the court ruling went in the father’s favour because I looked like I didn’t care, despite having been willing to drive all the way over for the trial AND also sitting by the phone all day waiting for a phone call that never came. Other lawyers and mediators also did similarly poor jobs, but how much information do you want? One last point on this – the lawyer sent my laptop to a computer technician to extract the proof for court of a search history of [REDACTED] [REDACTED]” from when my ex-husband had been using my laptop. [REDACTED] kept my laptop for three weeks (our only access to the internet at the time – and I was doing university studies) and succeeded in wiping all the painfully obvious history and giving us a report that they couldn’t find anything!

The Family Law Court:

- Family assessor (social worker) determined that I was definitely a victim of domestic violence as she witnessed my terror at seeing the abusive ex-husband, and yet she chose to advocate for unsupervised access for my daughter. I hold her responsible for the harm done to my daughter.
- Judge ignored all the information about domestic violence and chose to provide [REDACTED]’s dad with unsupervised access to her. I hold him responsible for the harm done to her also. In my opinion he may have held her down whilst she was raped.

**6. Do you have any suggestions for new or better service provision for women exiting abusive relationships? (what would have helped you to better navigate this really difficult time in your life?).**

Better educated service providers and family law court staff. OR expert advisors to those who lack the education. If the family law court judge and family assessor were up to date on their knowledge and fully educated on the topic they would have acknowledged that an abusive husband/partner would also be a risk to his children, and continue to abuse the woman through the children this would make a HUGE difference to all of our lives!

Bring back the better case management provision (such as it was when I received it) for women exiting DV- no matter what their time line. It's so necessary. Also, ensure that advisors such as 1800Respect counsellors are actually up to date and send people to services that will work for them.

More education community wide – in schools, police academies, law courts and churches.

More education for those studying social work, psychology and counselling so that they can recognise DV and not put the women and children at further harm.

More social housing. If this is not obvious, I don't know what is!

Change the bail laws to protect women and their children.

**7. Can you give an idea of the financial hardship you experienced due to leaving the abusive relationship?**

I was prepared to leave with nothing in order to regain my freedom, but that wasn't very practical. Despite having paid the deposit on our house and having contributed more than equally in mortgage payments, AND despite having the greater share of parental responsibilities, and having paid for/organised the repairs and presentation of our house for sale, I received exactly half of the sale proceeds. I was left with the scraps of our belongings that he didn't want. I did get my office furniture and laptop so I could continue my business. I did not get any of his superannuation, despite having worked for his business for a year.

**8. Did you experience homelessness or were you at risk of homelessness due to leaving the abusive relationship?**

Yes, we couch surfed, and a couple of nights [REDACTED] and I had to stay in separate houses because friends couldn't house the both of us! When we did get a private rental it was definitely on the low end of the spectrum. There is something about being homeless that is very hard to describe. You feel like you are outside the bubble of society. You aren't really a person – not like everyone else. You don't have the same rights. Can't purchase a phone/phone plan and many other things. You just aren't really there – it's like you are an invisible thing outside of society.

**9. How did you solve your housing issue?**

The judge ordered that I find permanent accommodation in South Australia (I had fled to [REDACTED] and was staying with friends where we were safe) within 5 business days, or lose my child! Who can achieve that?! Well, with the help of my parents we did. We had a family friend who had a rental property that had been trashed. They had stripped it bare and it was not tenanted of course. They offered to rent this property to us. It required painting and carpeting. There were nails in the floor that I had to protect my 4 yo from. I painted the internal walls and the landlord helped me find work so that I could pay the rent.

**10. Do you have any other comments? (Maybe barriers that kept you from leaving?)**

Questions? Would you like more information about the Housing Proposal or to be more involved in it? Let me know.