

'Why didn't you just leave?': Domestic violence survivors explain why it's not that simple

One in four Australian women has experienced domestic abuse by a current or former partner.

The sheer volume of the people affected means that we can't talk enough about this issue.

Be warned, this article contains details about abuse, trauma and death that could be triggering for some people.

When it comes to domestic violence, there's one question that always seems to stand out: "Why didn't you just leave?". And it's one the survivors featured on the show all addressed.

While Australian domestic violence statistics depict the disproportionate victimisation of women by their partners, the episode also featured men who have been affected.

This week's episode spends time introducing us to the survivors and hearing their stories of how they met their partners. There were even moments of humour and levity, which ultimately made the gut-punch of hearing the survivors' stories more powerful.

We hear from survivors who share what it was like living with abusive partners and relatives as well as the highly publicised cases of Roia Atmar, Dr Ann O'Neill and Anj Barker.

As confronting as the show is, it is necessary and informative TV. Here's some of what we learnt.

'How does domestic and family abuse happen?'

"Did you ever think this would happen to you?".

None of the survivors ever expected that they'd be the target of domestic violence, but that doesn't mean they were unfamiliar with it.

One survivor, Libby from Melbourne, told us she'd witnessed a lot of violence towards her mother from a young age.

Sapphire Sol's abuser was a close relative — her father. Sapphire tells us that she grew up in a segregated religious community and the act of smacking your kids was the norm. She says the mentality was one of control through violence.

There was also nothing out of the ordinary when it came to their recounts of how they met their partners. There were no obvious warning signs at the earliest stages of their relationship.

Most people don't expect to be victims. But as the relationships developed, some common things did start to emerge.

Their partner's need for "power" and "control" were recurring themes in each of the survivor's stories and were the red flags that something was up.

Ann O'Neill, whose story was widely publicised, told us that it was hard to identify whether it was nature or nurture that led to her husband's abusive behaviour.

"[Is it] what he's been brought up to expect, that the man is the head of the house and gets what he needs? Or was it something more sinister going on?" she says.

All the interviewees shared their experiences of being told what to do, how to act, what to wear and who to see by their partners. Manipulation, isolation and belittling were common threads.

"You weren't free to be yourself because of the mental manipulation constantly making you second-guess yourself, constantly belittling you," Sapphire says.

What became apparent was that domestic and family abuse isn't just limited to the physical side of things. Mental and emotional abuse can be just as sinister, and can often be a warning sign.

The survivors say that it wasn't something that happens overnight. It was a gradual process, chipping away at their confidence and self-esteem gradually.

"Breathing, that's what really pissed him off," shares Ann. The way that line is delivered, you'd be forgiven for thinking that was a joke. It's not.

It didn't take much to "provoke" abuse.

Survivors share that they'd blame themselves, questioning whether if they'd just done something different they wouldn't experience the abuse any more.

"Maybe I've said something, maybe I've looked at him the wrong way," Russell Vickery from Melbourne says.

Geraldine, also from Melbourne, describes what it was like to be in that situation. She said she felt like she couldn't breathe, she was in a constant state of worry all the time.

Hearing the graphic details of the physical and mental abuse these survivors experienced is confronting and it's nothing short of cruel.

'Why didn't you just leave?'

It's arguably one of the most common questions domestic and family abuse survivors get asked.

We hear a plethora of reasons: love, finances, the fear of not being able to make it on your own. All of these stem from the stripped confidence and self-worth from prolonged abuse.

"It's not like someone who'd just been abused can go out and work. Abuse f**ks you up!" says Sapphire.

For people going through domestic and family violence, the decision to stay often outweighs the fear of what may happen after deciding to leave — whether it's the fear of what will happen to them, or what their partners might do to themselves as a result.

Threats of violence, suicide, blackmail, revenge porn — all reasons why an abuse victim would choose to stay.

"At the age of 12, we lost our mother from being murdered by her partner," shares Libby. "My mother had found the strength to leave him, he ambushed her and killed her."

'When did you decide that enough was enough?'

There was a commonality in many of the stories: ongoing abuse that culminated in an act of violence.

Geraldine describes looking at her daughter during one of her partner's violent outbursts and thinking "this is not OK".

As an audience member, what I'd hoped to hear once they decided to leave was that they all breathed a sigh of relief and lived their lives happily ever after. But the reality for some survivors isn't always the case. For some, the worst part wasn't over.

For Ann, a few days after the divorce hearing, her husband broke into her house in the early hours of the morning and murdered their kids before turning the gun on himself.

The physical scars are evident on some of the survivors, but the emotional toll — those experiences are harder to see and they often take longer to heal.

Russell has physical scars and hated them for the longest time but now, they're a badge of honour.

"They're a reminder of where I was and what I don't want, and it just reminds me how lucky I am," he says.

Roia says despite the horrible physical scars she carries, she sees them as a blessing.

"If this [the abuse] didn't happen, then I wouldn't have been in that hospital and I wouldn't have met the social worker and the police, and I sure wouldn't be sitting here today talking about it," she says.

When asked how they felt about the questions, Roia says: "Even if one person takes something from it, then mission accomplished."

Family and domestic violence support services:

1800 RESPECT national helpline: 1800 737 732

Men's Referral Service: 1300 766 491

Lifeline (24-hour crisis line): 131 114

Relationships Australia: 1300 364 277

Other resources that can help:

WIRE: 1300 134 130

Victims of Crime (or your state or territory's Victims of Crime service):
1800 819 817

If you're in immediate danger, call the police on triple zero

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