

Without bruises and broken bones, Eva didn't recognise her husband was abusive

Warning: This article describes experiences of domestic violence.

Eva* had been experiencing abuse from her husband for almost a decade when he said: "You know these people you hear about on the TV killing their wives and children? That's how I feel."

It was this threat against their children that prompted her to call police for the first time.

With their help, they were able to leave. But a week later her husband found them.

Eva was left bashed and stabbed. He fled with the kids.

A day later he was found, the children were returned to their mother, and after a long legal process, he was convicted and jailed.

That was 15 years ago, and Eva says people still ask why she didn't go to police sooner.

Like for many victim-survivors, the answer isn't straightforward.

I spoke to 40-year-old Eva about the many reasons she felt she could not report what was happening to her, including not knowing what domestic violence looked like, and an upbringing where men held all the power.

These are her words.

'He was very charming'

I moved to Australia from Russia with my family as a young teen. I was a full citizen when I met my ex-husband. Many people assume I needed a visa or something.

I met him when I was 19 and at the movies with a friend. He was very charming. It's only when I look back now, I realise there were signs from that very first day. It was a quick romance. Within four weeks of knowing him, we got engaged. By eight months we were married and I was three months pregnant.

He was saying all the things I wanted to hear from a partner, including he didn't want to be anything like his own father. There was a lot of violence around the house when he was growing up. He'd told me about an ex-girlfriend that was "crazy" and he'd have to call the police on her all the time. Only later I found out he had a record against his name for domestic violence and breaching an AVO.

There were times in our marriage he used to call the police on me with accusations like I'd stolen the car, when really I was trying to run away. He made me quit my studies because he said he would always provide for me and I don't need to work. At 19 that sounded appealing; he'll be my man, my protector. But that was him taking away my freedom. There was financial control, religious control, a lot of coercive control. Most of the time I actually thought I was the problem. My husband made me believe it was always my fault. I did everything wrong.

Why victims don't report domestic violence

Jen* experienced verbal, emotional and psychological abuse from her ex-husband for more than a decade. Going to the police never felt like an option.

'I thought domestic violence was bruises and broken bones'

He didn't actually hit me — he would push me, slap me — but never left a mark. So I had nothing to prove it or show for it. No bruises or broken bones — and I thought that was what domestic violence was.

Everything else I put down to not getting to know each other properly because we got married so quickly.

The way he would put it to me was that I needed to work on the relationship. I could make it better if only I behaved better. I didn't even recognise all of those things were violence. And not having any money — how would I provide for three kids?

You are empty and totally dependent on him.

You just want violence to stop and live happily with him.

A culture where men are in power

In my upbringing [in Russia], the man takes charge, he takes control. You listen to your man. My dad was in the army and I really saw this strong, male figure type I was hoping to meet for myself. When I complained to my parents about my husband, I was told to go home and apologise. One marriage is supposed to last forever, so I definitely didn't want to be a failure in my own.

I'd also experienced sexual assault from a family member's partner as a teen. I received no support from the family and many didn't believe me.

Not having that support was really daunting and I feel like that made it harder to navigate what was happening in my marriage. 'You only question, how can I do better?'

It was only after I called the police I learnt about refuges. I didn't know there were places you could go. You don't know what you don't know.

I didn't know I was experiencing domestic violence. So I wasn't going to type into Google "Where can I go?" All you know is you're not a good wife and you need to do better. You don't question "Where can I go?" You only question "How can I do better?"

Life after domestic violence

When I finally did make that call to police and leave, it was because I was so scared. I felt I was safer on the street rather than at home. I made up my mind out of fear.

I told police, "I don't care if I have to sleep in a cell, I am not coming back here." They laughed — not at me — but because they knew I wouldn't have to. I could go to a refuge with my children.

Things have changed since my experience. We are talking about domestic violence more openly. It seems there is more understanding, there is help, but I was at an advocacy event recently and a lady came up to me and said, "Where do I go?"

So we can continue what we're doing — getting the information out there — but there needs to be more engagement at higher levels.

We need to focus on prevention. Let men know this is not the right thing to do.

*Name changed for privacy reasons.