

Home sweet

Research shows that one in four women will be affected by domestic violence at some point in their lives. **tonic** talks to Amy Norman about her years of hell at the hands of her abusive partner – and how she finally broke free.

Up until the age of 16, Amy Norman was a typical teenager from an Australian middle-class family. However, after becoming involved with the wrong crowd, she ditched the classroom and her family for a drug addict boyfriend. As a result she became subject to a cycle of vicious daily beatings. **tonic** tells her story.

'I got into a relationship that I didn't realise was going to be as bad as it turned out to be. He was four years older than me and I thought he was the best looking man I had ever seen. I had been flattered that he had paid me so much attention.'

'By the time my daughter was six months old I rarely left the house unless I was ordered to go somewhere, which was usually to score drugs and only when he wanted them'

However, Amy was blissfully unaware that in a year her perfect beau would become the man who would instil her with unmitigated terror. Her partner and his friends introduced Amy to a world of alcohol, drugs and crime, which resulted in her using narcotics to numb the excruciating physical and emotional pain.

Words Dawn Mellowship

'The violence started with lots of name calling and putting down, which was his way of controlling me. Then physical violence ended up happening every day and he was able to do that because he had already lowered my self esteem so much that I didn't know how to handle it. I ended up falling pregnant and didn't understand anything about domestic violence until after my baby was born.'

After a short lull when her first child was born, Amy's partner's violent behaviour continued and intensified. Jealous of the baby and fiercely possessive, he limited the time Amy could spend outside the house and prevented her from seeing her parents. What should have been a routine shopping trip ended in a nightmare for Amy when she returned to find her partner enraged, accusing her of sleeping with another man.

'Before I knew what was happening I had hit the floor, my cheek stinging from the back-hander I had not seen coming. He threw me on the cushion forcing my legs apart... he painfully entered me, thrusting so hard I thought I might die.'

'By the time my daughter was six months old I rarely left the house unless I was ordered to go somewhere, which was usually to score drugs and only when he wanted them. I would sit for hours sobbing uncontrollably, my daughter's head resting on my shoulder. It became a common occurrence that every morning



home?



Domestic violence fact file

Domestic violence is more common than you might think. Research has shown that one in four women and one in six men will be affected by domestic violence at some point in their lifetime, and it accounts for approximately 16% of all violent crime. (*Crime in England and Wales 2004/5* report)

Domestic violence is usually characterised by a coercive and aggressive pattern of behaviour by one individual against another (predominantly against women), taking place within a close relationship.

The violence can happen in a variety of relationships and to absolutely anyone. It can consist of physical, emotional, sexual, psychological or financial abuse, and can include forced marriage and 'honour crimes'. Violence, per se, may not necessarily be involved.

Indications of being in an abusive relationship can include: receiving constant criticism, put downs and verbal abuse; disrespectful behaviour such as belittling you in front of others, negating your opinions, constantly cross-examining you, lying to you; isolating you from friends and family; harassment such as following and checking up on you, public humiliation; threatening you with violence or financial restrictions; actual sexual or physical violence; self denial – saying the abuse will cease; constant victimisation.

Some of the reasons for staying with the abuser can include: hope that the abuser will change; self-blame; fear of the future; fear of what the perpetrator will do if they leave them (which can include threatening or actually attacking the victim and/or those close to her); the extent of social isolation; severely dented self-esteem; fear of the stigma attached to being a single parent.

For a child witnessing or hearing domestic violence there are seriously detrimental emotional and psychological consequences. According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2004), the child may develop problems such as: depression; insomnia; bed wetting; flashbacks; nightmares; low self esteem and self-harming.

Many mothers struggle to protect their children, due to being compelled to abide by court-imposed contact orders that ensure that the perpetrator has ongoing contact with the victim via her children.

Women's Aid (www.womensaid.org.uk), a national domestic violence charity, provides information on how you can react in a crisis. The National Domestic Violence Helpline (0808 2000 247, freephone, 24 hours) or a local refuge can offer support and help you find somewhere safe to go.



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he woke me with a punch to the head. The violence continued to get worse until I fell pregnant again with my son through a traumatic, violent episode of being raped and tortured.'

This harrowing episode Amy is referring to involved her being tied to her bed, raped anally while being beaten and then used as a human ashtray by her partner, who callously pushed the burning embers into her raw bleeding flesh. Amy actually had several pregnancies but had the others terminated to avoid bringing a child into such a devastating environment. Her

final pregnancy was at too late a stage for an abortion, so she had no choice but to go ahead with the birth.

Despite trying to get assistance from the justice system on numerous occasions, Amy was still left helpless, accused by one judge of suffering from postnatal depression, leading to her 'irrational' behaviour. This judge refused to grant a restraining order and left Amy to go home with her abusive boyfriend. Her attempt to get help simply resulted in being treated even more brutally.

'The justice system actually made matters worse by not believing me. That is another form of being put down by the people who are supposed to help and protect you. I don't think they understand how they can actually make the situation even more difficult.'

Amy mustered the courage to leave one day and fled with her daughter to her parents' house. At that time her parents knew very little of what was happening because she had concealed it from them. They welcomed her with open arms and for a short time some semblance of normality returned to her life. This,

however, was very short lived. After telephoning her parents' house twice, with Amy's father hanging up on both occasions, her partner sent a threatening letter that was to yet again leave Amy feeling terrified.

'People don't understand that the violence and fear doesn't stop just because you leave. He was his usual charming self in the letter. He called me a bitch and said I would never escape him. If I didn't do what he said he threatened to kill my family.'

Fearing for her family, Amy returned to her partner and after a short time of behaving more reasonably, he regressed to his past behaviour. As well as being physically violent, he would starve Amy and her daughter and frequently had sex with other women.

Despite showing police her injuries, nothing was done to protect Amy. The final straw came when her partner threw her down the stairs (leading to the premature birth of their son) and held their daughter hostage.

'That was my biggest motivation for getting out – not knowing whether the

baby I was carrying was going to survive, and not knowing whether my other kid who was stuck in the house was going to survive either. At that time the fear wasn't for myself but for the kids. I realised that I had to help myself any way that I could, which happened to be drugging him and leaving because he found me wherever that I went.

'It took a long time to get away from him completely and it took drastic measures that I don't think anyone should have to take. It meant for me travelling around the country and having my name changed. He did track me down a couple of times – it took ten years for everything to be OK.

'In the family courts in Australia, when the father goes for custody of the children, domestic violence incidents aren't allowed to be brought up. It

change everything. I don't regret it because it has made me who I am. It has given me opportunities that I wouldn't have had otherwise. You just need to learn to make the most out of any situation. There are lessons to be learned everywhere in life. That was my biggest lesson.'

Amy's children obviously suffered throughout this whole experience.

'My daughter is now 14 and she still has a lot of things left over from it. She still remembers quite a lot, although she was under four when she saw the last of the violence. I have been told by a psychologist that everything that a child sees and is exposed to under the age of five is what stays in their subconscious. She has a few issues that she is dealing with because of it. My son hasn't got any problems. I think because he was a baby,

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doesn't matter how he treated me, to the court's eyes it didn't mean he would treat the kids that way. I thought he had threatened the kids so many times and I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if he had hurt them. I have broken a lot of family court orders keeping the kids away from him and I was threatened with a 40-year jail term a few years ago. He didn't really want the kids; he did it to get to me and I think a lot of men use the system in that way.'

After having to temporarily break away from her family and change her name, Amy finally managed to get herself and her children away from her abusive boyfriend and was eventually able to rebuild her life.

'I had to learn how to get my confidence up and my self-esteem back. One way that I did that was to join a public speaking group. I have spent a lot of time by myself, getting to know who I am again. I had to figure out what I wanted out of life.

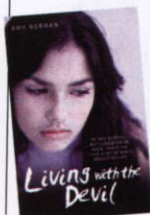
'I don't settle for anything now, I am a stronger person. People ask me if I regret what I went through, but it's a waste of energy to want to go back and

'I have raised them to understand respect for another human. They are very well adjusted. The earlier people get kids out, the better it is.'

From her own experiences Amy offers this advice to anyone in a similar predicament: 'Talk to as many people as you can. You won't be believed by all of them, but eventually you will be. Find a way to get out – harness the courage it takes to live with a violent person and use it in a different way.'

Although a sombre story, Amy's experiences do offer hope. She came out the other side of this tragedy with greater resolve and a stronger spirit.

'The emotional abuse took the longest to get over, although I still have some physical scars that will be there forever. I don't look over my shoulder any more. I can get on with my life, which is the best thing.'



Extracts from Amy's book *Living with the Devil* have been used and adapted for this article.

Living with the Devil by Amy Norman is available in stores nationwide, RRP £17.99. **tonic**

GETTING HELP

In an immediate emergency, call **999** for the emergency services

www.womensaid.org.uk

or call the freephone 24-hour National Domestic Violence Helpline on **0808 2000 247**

www.refuge.org.uk

Domestic Violence Helpline for London **08705 995 443**

www.welshwomensaid.org Welsh Women's Aid **0808 80 10 800**

www.womensaid.ie Irish Women's Aid **1800 341 900**

www.scottishwomensaid.co.uk Scottish Women's Aid **0800 027 1234**

www.broken-rainbow.org.uk

A telephone helpline for lesbians, gay males, bi-sexuals and transgender people experiencing domestic violence **08452 60 44 60**

For men experiencing domestic violence call the Male Advice & Enquiry Line on **0845 064 6800**

The Hideout website (for children and young people) can be found at: **www.thehideout.org.uk**

For help for perpetrators see: **www.respect.uk.net** (the UK association for domestic violence and perpetrator programmes). Helpline **0845 122 8609**

For the National Plan for Domestic Violence, see: **www.crimereduction.gov.uk/domesticviolence51.htm**