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Relationship Abuse: A Solo Battle

HE FLIRTED WITH OTHER GIRLS, TOLD HER SHE LOOKED UGLY, NEEDED TO LOSE WEIGHT. THE POLICE CAME TO SAVE HER. IN RESPONSE, SHE AGREED TO MARRY HIM.

BY JENICA FOSTER

Tilt your head back and run your fingers slowly from the bottom of your chin to your clavicle. Feel the way your tender skin awakens under the pads of your fingers. The way your muscles move when you swallow, the small hole at the base of your neck and the steady beat of your heart.

There is no statistic that says in clear terms the most fragile part of the human body. From a physical standpoint some think it is the spine, because if it is broken there is a high chance of paralysis or death. In an emotional sense, some believe it to be the heart.

For me, the most fragile part of the human body is the neck. It can be choked, strangled or slit. But above all, the neck is vulnerable because it exposes feelings, thoughts and insecurities, like an unlocked diary just waiting to be read.

“When people are insecure, troubled, scared, concerned, worried or nervous, they cover or touch their neck,” writes Joe Navarro, an ex-FBI agent of the behavioural analysis program.

Navarro uses his research and practical experience observing nonverbal communications for the FBI to write a blog for Psychology Today. One post titled, “Body Language Secrets of the Neck” discusses the different meanings of neck touching.

Unlike other body parts, I’ve noticed the neck is rarely touched by anyone else. The only exception is by a lover or an aggressor. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference, especially in relationships. Much like my friend Jamie, as she seemed to confuse her abuser with her boyfriend.

Four out of 10 people in Calgary have experienced abuse in current or previous relationships, says Connect Family and Sexual Abuse Network, a Calgary service with a 24-hour support line.

The Network conducted 451 online interviews with 16 to 69-year-old Calgarians. The interviewees were presented with eight scenarios adapted from a Alberta Children and Youth Services survey and were asked to rate their current relationship against those scenarios.

Other data supports this. Of the approximately 849,430 15 to 74-year-old people living in Calgary, about 339,772 people have experienced abuse in a relationship, according to the 2011 Civic Census. That’s an alarmingly high number.

Gaye Warthe, chair of the department of social work and disability studies at Mount Royal University, found similar results. Her 2010 study of Mount Royal students detected that approximately 30 per cent of students had experienced violence in a current or previous dating relationship.

Warthe says most abuse occurs because of an issue of power and control. If it looks like the abuser is going to lose control, such as the end of a relationship, Warthe says this is when the victim is most at risk.

While a friend may seem like the logical person to turn to for someone who is being abused, they generally don’t know how to handle the situation, Warthe says.

I experienced first hand the truth of her words on a dark spring evening.

It was 9 p.m. My friend Jamie and I were driving to her house after a long day of working at the mall. I was wearing a high-waisted skirt with a grey tank top and ballet flats. My long blonde hair curled in loose beach-waves around my shoulders, and my eyes sparkled with iridescent shadow.

We walked in the front door and noticed a jar full of blue decorative balls was smashed on the hardwood floor. A glass cup was shattered in the kitchen and there was an empty bottle of alcohol sitting on the coffee table. The only other person who had access to this house today was Jamie’s boyfriend, Steven.

Steven had been under psychiatric care at the Foothills hospital only a week before for mixing prescription drugs and ecstasy with alcohol, causing him to hear things no one else could. He was released on good behaviour into his parents’ care, but stayed at Jamie’s house during the day to escape his parents.

Steven had a history of abusing Jamie both emotionally and physically. He frequently told her she looked ugly, needed to lose weight, and he was seen flirting with other girls.

But at 21, Jamie loved him and left her engagement with another man for Steven.

A messy house and relationship troubles weren’t enough to ruin our night-out dancing. We cranked the tunes, turned the curling iron on and retrieved our mascara. Less than 10 minutes later, there was an incessant pounding at the door.

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“Oh no, it’s him. Don’t open the door,” I said. But, like any good horror flick, the main characters seem to throw good judgment out the window. Jamie opened the door to find Steven on her doorstep. And despite his irrational behaviour and previous abuse, she invited him in.

While they talked in the living room, I hid out in the bathroom around the corner. After all the bad news I had heard about him, it was disconcerting to see someone just like me. I pictured a tall, well-built male in ripped jeans and a black leather jacket with blood shot eyes and silver rings on every finger.

In reality, he was 21, had short brown hair, jeans, and a black V-neck T-shirt that framed his fairly skinny arms. But then again, abusers rarely fit the hard-core biker, gang member stereotype.

Jamie ended up kicking him out of her house. The catch was he only left momentarily. He came back pounding on the door begging to be let in. I was cowering in the bathroom imagining all the ways I could protect myself.

I could lock myself in the bathroom, but there were no windows if he managed to break down the door. If he tried to attack me I could burn him with the piping hot curling iron, or try to use those self-defense techniques I learned in gym class. But that was five years ago, and I’m out of practice.

I settled on running to the adjacent bedroom, breaking the window, and making a run for it. The only problem was I couldn’t justify leaving Jamie to fend for herself, so I hoped the adrenaline coursing through my veins and my beauty supplies would be enough to keep me safe.

The next thing I knew Jamie was screaming and threatening to call Steven’s parents if he didn’t leave. In a last attempt at defiance, he thrust his fist through the porch door, breaking the plastic and shattering the hinges.

Jamie was a hysterical mess. Tears caused black mascara to run down her face and her chest was moving so fast she was practically hyperventilating. Her cell phone vibrated and Steven’s voice rang clear as he said, “If you call my parents I’m going to hit the highway at 120 (km/h) and kill myself.”

There is no way to know for sure if Steven had any intention of committing suicide, or if he was just manipulating Jamie. But either way, his threat had value because his brother committed suicide. As much as Jamie hated Steven at the moment, she didn’t want to be the reason he killed himself.

We sat in the dark for half an hour, trying to process the information and decide what to do next. The lights of Steven’s car flashed by as he drove in circles around the block. He knew we were still home.

Jamie’s shaking fingers dialed 911 on her pink cell phone.

The Calgary police arrived within 20 minutes. I tried to act nonchalant, like this wasn’t a big deal for me. I tried to be the supportive friend, when all I wanted to do was break down and cry. I knew the police were there to help, but giving a statement took me from simply playing the role of a bystander to a witness.

I didn’t want to be involved. I wanted to forget the whole thing ever happened, but like it or not I was tied to the event. It wasn’t a bad dream I could wake up from. It was real, and I was completely shaken.

The funny thing is, despite Steven’s abuse, Jamie was engaged to him only a couple months later.

This is fairly common behaviour, says Warthe, the Mount Royal university professor who researches dating violence. She says people often stay in abusive relationships because they are embarrassed, feel responsible for the abuse and don’t want other people to know what’s going on.

I didn’t, and still don’t understand the full extent of Jamie’s relationship. But I do know that at one point she was happy with Steven, and that has to count for something.

Despite multiple chances, Jamie didn’t marry him. At a friend’s going away party less than a month after the engagement, Steven punched her in the face and tried to strangle her. He was charged for domestic abuse and mischief.

She says, “Currently he claims he would like to get back together and make it work, but I’m still scared to be around him.”

Jamie’s fingers caressed her neck many times through the course of her relationship with Steven. Maybe he thrived on the power it gave him to see her vulnerability so easily displayed. While Steven is mostly known for being an aggressor, I can’t forget he was once also a lover. This confusion and Jamie’s vulnerability lead to her being taken advantage of. But it’s easy for me to say she shouldn’t date him because I wasn’t directly involved.

At the end of the day it is up to each person to decide how to live, friends are merely a support system to fall back on. We alone must decide when to uncover our necks and expose the contours of our bare skin.



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