

Scars of Emotional Abuse Run Deep – Vanessa’s* Story

“I was married to Dave* for 11 long years; I stayed a lot longer than I should. My regrets are not only for myself, but that the children went through so much for so long.

“Even before we got married there were signs. Like my hens’ night three weeks prior to the wedding which Dave insisted on coming to. When I asked him not to, he showed a particularly nasty side saying I never did anything with him. I questioned whether I was doing the right thing even then, but 10 days before the wedding my Nana died and there was so much going on for everyone that I didn’t want to add to it.

“Coming from a Christian family, I had waited ‘til I was married to be with Dave. Marriage meant so much to me. From the start Dave controlled everything and I spent my life trying to please him, trying to be a good wife, housekeeper and then mother to our two children. Although things weren’t good, I felt a huge sense of responsibility to keep the family together at all costs. Even if it meant me being miserable, I didn’t want the children to come from a broken home. My parents were both ministers; I thought I’d be letting them down by ‘failing’ at marriage.

“Dave made me feel like I would be nothing without him. He didn’t want me to belong to anything outside the home. When I wanted to join a singing choral, he said I was useless at singing. When I joined the church band he deliberately did things so I couldn’t make the practices. Dave controlled all the money. I had an allowance for groceries, but I was never allowed to know what the power or phone cost, and he questioned me about any eftpos transactions. I wanted to start a catering business but he said I’d fail and he wouldn’t give me any money for the start up. After I had surgery he said I should be thankful to him as no one else would ever want me after that.

“Dave would go from being completely civil to a raging lunatic, screaming and swearing at me and the kids for being noisy, lazy, messy or embarrassing him in public. The kids were just little, but he never made any allowances. In church he looked like the perfect doting father, but in the car on the way home he would turn on me, screaming at me for not controlling the children. It was never in front of others. He had status in the community and did a lot of things for a lot of people. He was seen as a perfect father, a brilliant provider. Part of the reason I stayed so long was I thought people wouldn’t believe me, they’d think I was making it up.

“He didn’t do anything with the children, never kicked a ball, built a hut, took them out, or did family holidays. He would sit on the couch watching violent adult movies, and yell at the kids for not sitting still. They were five and seven. He manhandled the children, and called it ‘discipline’, but he went too far. He would literally throw them into time out, flinging the child against the wall. He’d smack Jack, and stand over him yelling “You f**k’n little woos, you never listen.” Dave would be physically shaking, gritting his teeth, and Jack often carried bruises on his skinny little arms from Dave’s overbearing grip.

“Dave hit me physically only once, but emotionally he controlled the family constantly through his violent verbal outbursts, accusations and put downs. We never knew what to expect when he came home from work, it was like walking on eggshells.

“When I finally confided in my mother that I wanted to leave Dave, she put her arms around me and said “You don’t know how long your father and I have waited to hear you say that.” It was such a relief to find my parents supported me.

(*not their real names)

“It was through the church that I got given a card for Christchurch Women’s Refuge (Aviva). I carried it around for three days. I couldn’t bring myself to ring. I didn’t think I was ‘one of those sorts of women’. I had a misconception about what abuse was, and generalised about what ‘sort’ of women it happened too. When I did finally make the call, I realised there was a lot more to Aviva than I thought. They had so many options for support. They helped me believe in myself, that I could stand on my own two feet if I had to. I began to see that I was a whole lot stronger than what I’d thought.

“They helped me get a lawyer, find out what financial assistance was available, and opened my eyes up to what abuse really is. I did a 10 week programme about family violence, and it helped me see how abused I was, how it had effected my whole life and the children’s lives.

“My son did the programme for children; he was eight. It was a real turning point for him. He realised that he had not done anything wrong to make Daddy mad. He met other kids who shared the same emotions. It was huge for him to realise there were kids in the same situation. Jack has since said to me that he understands why we had to leave.

“Two years down the track, I’ve got a successful catering business and live life on my own terms now. I know I have to be happy and healthy for my children to be happy and healthy. Friends have commented that the children are ‘300 times more settled and I should be proud of myself’. Believe me those words are like music to my ears, and I feel like I’m singing a whole new song to it.”