

Domestic abuse in same-sex relationships

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May, 2020. He appears on my television screen. I am shocked. I feel anxious. I feel clammy. I feel disbelief. At first, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. I pause the television, rewind, and play it again. I check that I am not mistaken. I am not. It is him. We age over time, but our voice doesn't seem to change. I rewind again, and again and again. Somehow, I am hoping that I am wrong. I am not. This was my abuser, once again in my living room.

Rewind the clock 21 years. It is 1999. I am a young, ambitious teacher. I am 29. I worked hard for my career. Teaching was, and still is, the only thing I have ever wanted to do. It is my purpose in life.

1999 seems so long ago. Yet, my memories are razor sharp. I was outed to my parents when I was 18. We never talked about it after that. I finished my A-levels, went to university, and achieved my dream of becoming a teacher. Section 28 was still in force, so I always felt that I was on dodgy ground talking about my sexuality, even to my colleagues in school. I was gay, male and I taught young children. Attitudes were different back then. My sexuality had been raised as a matter of concern at my interview for my teaching job. Despite this, I managed, somehow, to secure the job, so it was easier, and safer, not to talk about it. I actively separated my personal and professional identities.

Some colleagues were fantastic, and I had friends who were also gay or lesbian. This support network strengthened my resilience, even though I could not talk to my family easily about my experiences. Meyer's (2003) model of Minority Stress demonstrates the additional stressors that people with minority identities are exposed to. Distal stressors include direct exposure to discrimination, harassment and prejudice which results in an additional level of stress. Proximal stressors are internalised forms of stress that result from the anticipation that prejudice, harassment and discrimination will occur, regardless of whether they do or not. Meyer (2003) identified that this can result in concealment of identities and internalised homophobia where individuals experience stigma and begin to believe that they are less worthy.

As a young, gay person, growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I had been exposed to my fair share of distal stressors. I had been physically and verbally abused at school and had experienced discrimination during one of my teaching placements and during interviews for teaching posts. As a young teacher, I anticipated negative reactions from parents and some

colleagues, so I chose to conceal my sexuality. However, when I met him everything changed.

We met in a bar. He was younger than me. Very soon after we met, we moved in together. It was a foolish thing to do. I didn't notice the signs of domestic abuse at first. At the time, it wasn't something that was frequently discussed, and it certainly wasn't part of my own school curriculum. I wish it had been. I didn't notice the small things like his insistence that I was home from school at a certain time. This was difficult because I worked 20 miles away from where I lived. I was oblivious to the small things. I didn't recognise these as domestic abuse. He isolated me from my friends. He policed the time I arrived home from work. He made me pay for most things. He asked me for my PIN number. We didn't have mobile phones, but I can imagine that if we did have, it would have been very closely monitored. I convinced myself that he loved me, and I was prepared to sacrifice my self-respect for that 'love'.

It was a hot Saturday afternoon. We were out in the car and we stopped to go to the supermarket. I opened my wallet, only to find that my bank card was snapped in half. I must have sat on it. How annoying. We needed food. I went home, rang the bank, and ordered a new card. I waited for it to come. Two weeks later it still hadn't arrived. I rang the bank again. It had been sent out immediately and was being used. Strange. How could I not know that money was leaving my account? I went to the bank and they showed me the transactions. £50 here, £100 there. Money was being withdrawn daily, sometimes more than once a day. My account was overdrawn by £1500. The bank staff said it must have been someone who knew me, someone who knew my PIN number and it was only then that the reality of what I was experiencing finally hit home. I was being financially and emotionally abused. The bank has allowed him to also take out a loan in my name. He had walked into the bank, pretending to be me. He knew all my account details and other significant details. He wasn't asked to produce photo-identification. So, on top of the overdraft was a significant loan running into thousands of pounds. The bank agreed to freeze my account and start a new account for me, but it was my responsibility to clear the debt on the old account because I had been negligent. I had released my bank details to someone I trusted, my partner. And for that, I paid a price.

That evening I went home and confronted him. He denied it. Then he admitted it. I felt violated. I told my parents. This forced me to confront them with my sexuality again, which they found so difficult to acknowledge, and it forced them to accept that I was in a relationship where I was being controlled.

I arranged to pay the loan and overdraft back at the bank. I agreed to stay with him because he said he was sorry and because of his promise that things would get better. I believed him. I shouldn't have.

Things didn't get better. In fact, they got much worse. Within a matter of weeks, I was being emotionally abused. He went out during the week when I couldn't. He rang me at 2am or later in the early hours to pick him up, forcing me out of my sleep that I desperately needed. Once night I refused but I knew there would be a price to pay. When he eventually arrived home, he told me that I would pay the price for not picking him up. He grabbed my wallet, car keys and the telephone (we didn't have mobile phones) and he wished me good luck in getting to school. I lived over 20 miles away from my job. I was determined not to let all of this interfere with my career. I walked 3 miles to the train station. I had no money, so I told the train guard what had happened to me before I got on the train. I will never forget the feeling of shame that I experienced when I told others what was going on. That was sometimes worse than living with the abuse. I managed to get to school, and I managed to teach that day. I don't know how I did, but I did.

Then there was the day when we had yet another argument. I cannot remember what the argument was about, but he piled my clothes into the car, pushed me in the car then started throwing them all out of the window on the roads. It was embarrassing. I had seen this sort of stuff on television, but it wasn't how I wanted to live my life.

There was another night when I paid the price for something that I cannot recall. The punishment was that he played loud music all night so that I wouldn't be able to sleep. I remember knocking on the door of the next-door neighbour's the following day to apologise. Again, I felt nothing but shame when I had to tell them about the life I was living. Another night, I was forced to sleep in the car in the middle of winter, locked out of the house that I paid rent for. There was one evening when he kicked me to the ground in the middle of town. He always apologised the next day. He promised to change. And I always believed him.

There are too many incidents to remember, but one night I decided enough was enough. I planned an escape. I phoned my friend and asked her to come around to my house while he was out. We collected as many things as I could, and she took me to her house. I had to tell her husband and children what was happening to me. I didn't want to be a burden on her, so the night after that she arranged for me to stay with one of her friends. Again, I had to disclose the fact that I was in an abusive relationship. I never felt judged by anyone I told. Although I always received support, that doesn't take away the sense of shame and stigma that comes with domestic abuse.

After a few days I went back to my house when it was empty and to my horror discovered that it had been wrecked by him. Wardrobe doors had been pulled off and graffiti had been scratched into the plaster walls. I had to tell my landlord about the damage and once again the sense of shame overshadowed me.

I managed, at 29, to buy my own house. I felt safe there but one night I let my guard down, contacted him, picked him up and took him into my new life. Why? I cannot answer that question. Perhaps I felt lonely. At first things were great, but that didn't last long. One night I remember telling him that I was going to see my parents. He was laid on the sofa in a dressing down. He told me to be back within the hour. I promised him that I would be, I got into the car and I drove straight to the police station. I pleaded with them to help me get him out of my house. Once again, I had to make visible my sexuality to people I did not know, and I had to admit that I was a victim. Explaining the events repeatedly to different people was traumatic and the reaction I received from two police officers was not positive. I know that things are so different now, but at that time I was aware that the relationship between the police and the LGBTQ+ community was a fractured one. Nonetheless, they visited my house, removed him and told me not to let him back in. I got a panic alarm fitted in the house and wore a fob round my neck which activated it if I felt I was in danger.

I lived in constant fear that he would visit my house, even though the police had told him to stay away. Sometimes, I came home from work and he had been there. Notes had been pushed through my door. I didn't feel safe at school either. He knew where I worked. I was terrified of meeting him in the school car park late at night. One day, he rang my headteacher pretending to be the bank manager. The head saw through it straight away and told him not to ring the school again. I then had to explain everything to my head. I had tried so hard to separate my personal experiences from my professional life and I had now been forced to openly disclose my sexuality to my boss and forced to explain that I was a victim of domestic abuse. He was supportive, but I still felt shame.

In the middle of all of this, my mother suffered a life changing brain haemorrhage. Her blood pressure had rocketed and one day she fell to the ground having experienced a massive bleed on the brain. Of course, I will always shoulder some guilt. She must have been worrying about me, even though we rarely talked about what was happening to me.

One day I returned home and pulled up on the drive. He was there waiting for me with a pair of scissors in his hand. He forced me into the passenger seat and drove a terrifying journey through towns and villages and on the motorway. It was terrifying because he had not passed his test and, to my knowledge, had never taken driving lessons, yet we were travelling down the M1 at 70. He took me onto the moors. I honestly thought he was going to

kill me and, to be honest, I sometimes saw dying as a way of escaping the nightmare that I was experiencing. He forced me to go to a cash machine and withdraw £500. He told me that if I did, I would be free of him. I so, wanted to believe him. I took out the money, drove home and the next day he left. I knew that wouldn't be the last of it.

I had months of professional counselling, organised free by the police. My counsellor was brilliant. I explained that I was a professional, hard-working individual and felt ashamed at what had happened to me. She kept me strong. She stopped me from going back to him. I sold my house and moved 30 miles away so that I could not be contacted. He tried. But this time I never gave up. My counsellor had helped me to understand what was happening to me.

I have written this story to illustrate that domestic abuse is classless. It takes place across all social backgrounds. I also wanted to illuminate how people in same-sex relationships can become victims of domestic abuse, and this is not to deny the experiences of many, many women who suffer domestic abuse at the hands of male perpetrators. None of it is acceptable, whatever form it takes. Reaching out for help was critical to my survival. Talking to others was essential, even though I experienced shame. I didn't need to experience shame. It wasn't my fault. I wasn't weak. I had done nothing wrong. My experiences lasted 18 months but it felt like a lifetime. I carried on teaching, but the long-term effects of the abuse were more difficult to address. I experienced anxiety for which I needed medication. My confidence and self-esteem were eroded and took a long time to rebuild. I got there in the end, but it was a struggle. That day when I saw him on the television the anxiety came flooding back in, but it quickly subsided into rage. 20 years later I cannot help but feel rage that, once again, he was in my living room. He wasn't invited in. He will never be invited in. I didn't allow him to destroy my life.