

10 Focus

# When men become

Domestic violence is more common over the Christmas break, fuelled by alcohol consumption, family tension and financial issues. A small but significant number of the victims are men, writes **Mark White**.

**J**amie\*, a minister of religion in his 60s, spent his 36-year marriage "walking on egg shells". He'd had a very controlling childhood where he'd been told to do the opposite of what he felt was right.

"That's partly why I fell in love with my wife," he says. "She reminded me of my mother." Within weeks of their 1971 wedding, she was throwing things at him, screaming she hated him, walking out and saying she would never come back. "I was far away from where my parents lived, and I thought I would be kicked out of the seminary if the marriage broke down," he says. "So I felt trapped. I just tried to work inside the system, keep things calm. Once the children started arriving, it was too late."

The blow-ups happened once a month at the start, but were almost daily by the end. "I was trying to hang in there," he says.

But 36 years seems a long time to hang in. "Guys can run away to work. I did a lot of running away to work. At home... I did a lot of numbing out."

About 10 years ago, she got on top of him in bed and started hitting him - windmilling at him, screaming that she hated him and that she hoped he would go to hell. He had never told anyone what had been happening - he's marked off dozens of items on a domestic violence checklist, including financial control, using sex for favours, limiting his freedom, pinning him on the floor, kicking the pets, humiliating him, putting him down in front of the children, bagging him to friends and colleagues - but the next day, on his regular morning walk with a pastor friend, that changed.

He started crying and spoke up. "I love you," his friend said, "I support you, but this is on some weird planet." Jamie felt ashamed; men are supposed to be able to take care of themselves, and he was letting a woman beat up on him.

Uncovering the staggering depth of brutality women used to be subject to at home without question - and denouncing it - is one of the signature civilising social movements of the past 40 years. To this day, women are more likely to be severely injured, assaulted or killed at home. But are a smaller but significant number of men victims of domestic violence, too? And are they falling through the cracks?

"Reactionary, traditionalist, conservative, chauvinist, wanting to put women back in the kitchen, like I'm some sort of right-wing homophobic misogynist woman-hater who wants to take away everything feminism has achieved," says Greg Andresen - head of the One in Three campaign aimed at raising awareness of family violence against men - running through names he's been called. He starts chortling. "It hurts to be called

that stuff, especially when you look at all of our actions, all of our campaign material, everything we've done - there's not a skerrick of that in any of it." The campaign takes its name from a 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey that found 29.8 per cent of the victims of current partner violence since the age of 15 were male. Andresen believes the current thinking that domestic violence is 90-95 per cent men against women is wrong.

We think men are bigger and stronger, and can inflict more damage in a fight. Indeed, he agrees

slapping a woman isn't culturally acceptable, so should the opposite be?

Relationships counsellor Toni McLean worries abusive relationships can teach children the wrong way to resolve conflict. Research shows abuse can be transmitted down the generations. "We need to shift our focus from women victims of partner violence to victims of partner violence, and provide resources for dealing with all victims and all perpetrators. Children suffer regardless of which parent is violent," McLean says.

After reading a few studies you feel like you're watching a heavily annotated bunfight between researchers trying to show women are the overwhelming victims and others trying to show men are coping it just as badly.

"The problems are that the different definitions and research methodology researchers use, plus the reluctance of men to report, lead to different findings," says Professor Alfred Allan, from Western Australia's Edith Cowan University, who co-wrote a 2010 report, *Intimate Partner Abuse of Men*.

Says sociologist Dr Michael Flood, from the University of Wollongong:

"There are heated debates among various advocates addressing domestic violence." Flood criticises One in Three for not focusing on the wider issue of men's violence against men. Neither does he believe "there are tens of thousands of men out there living in fear of their female partners and not being able to access services".

Yet even if women make up 90 per cent of all prolonged coercive domestic violence cases, then so do several thousand Australian men.

"The question of men experiencing violence is one that hasn't really been discussed," says Randal Newton-John, at MensLine, the national telephone counselling service.

"It's generally seen as only happening to women."

**A 2008 study of Australian students who were dating found 14 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women perpetrated physical violence, with 64.9 per cent engaging in mutual violence.**

**Men made up about 40 per cent of British domestic violence victims each year from 2004-05 to 2008-09.**

**In gender and domestic and family violence incidents recorded by NSW Police in 2010, 34 per cent of victims were male, and 30 per cent of perpetrators were female.**

women are more likely to suffer systemic, continuing abuse, but argues other forms of abuse such as social isolation and emotional abuse can be "equally as controlling and as debilitating for the victim because they feel equally as trapped. There's somebody curtailing their freedom in these ways and you don't need to hit someone to do that. Women can do that just as much as men."

So, does One in Three's "29.8 per cent" mean one in three men is a victim of the headline bashings we associate with domestic violence and women? No, it doesn't. It reports incidents of partner violence - violence that's domestic, rather than "domestic violence" - which can be a one-off slap or months of unrelenting, one-sided abuse.

Still, a man



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# victims of abuse

There is no doubt from MensLine's experience that "we receive calls from men who are experiencing violence. Really, the important thing is to those men, how do they receive the help that they need to deal with that situation?" Police don't always believe complaints of domestic violence against men.

ACT teacher Ross Burdon, 54, has a DVO out against his ex-wife, who he met in the Philippines. When they fought, police would arrest him - charges would be dropped or defeated in court. He went to police with a complaint. "They said, 'She's a woman and how big are you?'" He showed them a video he had taken of her holding a frying pan. She had bashed holes in the door. She used to throw things, smash doors, once tried to hit him on the head with a pot plant. "We could be in the same room, her anger escalating and I knew - she knew it, too - that if she called the police there would be problems for me."

Then there is social isolation. Nothing NSW teacher Matthew\* did was right, from mixing cordial to putting sunscreen on his two children. His wife would say he was strange and embarrassing. She didn't want to be seen in public with him. He started to believe there was something wrong with him. He would escape verbal abuse by sleeping in his car and sneaking home at 5am to get clothes to take to a local pool for a shower and a shave before work. "I was scared to stay in the house and too scared to return until I thought it was safe."

Bill\* had been told for 18 months he was lazy - he couldn't work following a viral infection - and no one wanted to be near him. Police advised him to think about leaving the house after a row in which his wife of 12 years bit his wrist to the bone.

He thought he had nowhere to go, so he slept in his van for six weeks. There was a sports field in Camden, a river in Campbelltown, at a park, sometimes out at Bargo. Occasionally he'd stay at a servo because they had free showers. When the weather was really bad, an underground car park. One day Bill felt suicidal, and called the

DoCS domestic violence hotline. The woman who answered told him only men abuse women. Mates rolled their eyes and said "man up".

Jamie was the only man in a discussion group at an Anglicare-run domestic abuse seminar in the 1980s. He was told if he treated his wife with respect then she wouldn't act like that.

Will\*'s first relationship was coloured by growing up in a home where both parents were violent - he didn't know about healthy relationships, so when he moved in with a 40-year-old man as a 22-year-old the control was there from the start. He had to have sex whether he wanted to or not. He woke

depression - once a week, once a month. She would break things, throw things, lash out, punch, knowing they'd never touch her.

A 2012 NSW government report on domestic violence trends found "while men are less likely to be victims, the experience of those that are is equally as bad as that of other victims" - and that services for them are lacking. Liberal MLC Catherine Cusack wants more money aimed at addressing the causes of anger - and early intervention to empower men and women with tools to stop abuse. "I would love to see that non-judgmental, ideology-free support available to all victims, male and female," she says.

In NSW and Victoria, the main domestic violence lines are for women.

Men are referred elsewhere, including MensLine, and in Victoria, to the Men's Referral Service, which is designed to stop aggressive behaviour by men. "The vast majority of men contacting us as victims are most likely the perpetrator," says executive officer Danny Blay.

Newton-John says: "It's not easy for men to approach health services at the best of times. Men need to wait for a crisis. If they're on the receiving end of violence it might throw up questions about their masculinity and whether they deserve help. They do, but they question it."

Other countries have set up men's refuges. The Netherlands began a trial program in 2008 in its four biggest cities, with 10 places in each. They are used by victims, men beaten by their children or stalked, and young gay men from immigrant cultures. Adrie Vermeulen, co-ordinator of the Utrecht shelter, says that when it opened, most victims were Turkish or Moroccan, although there are now more Dutch. "We take them in our care and try to make a new future for them." Physical injuries are easier to spot and prosecute. But relentless verbal abuse can also damage. Studies have shown emotional pain lasts longer than physical pain.

The definition of domestic abuse in Britain now includes psychological intimidation - nothing but good news for anyone, female or male, at the receiving end.

"We get a lot of calls talking about emotional, psychological and verbal abuse," Newton-John says. "It's sometimes very insidious and difficult to understand personally the impact it's having, because you're not seeing broken bones or black eyes."

Recognising male victims doesn't mean dishonouring any female victims or redirecting resources. It can help reduce family violence further.

Matthew emailed to say he'd called the police to try to resolve an access issue and was directed to a domestic violence liaison officer. "She offered me a referral to counselling for victims of crime. I broke down crying. It made me feel like my perspective that I had been a victim had been validated by someone within the system."

MensLine Australia: 1300 789 978

**In the US 2010 National Intimate Person and Sexual Violence Survey, one in seven men reported they had experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner.**

**The number of women prosecuted for domestic violence in Britain rose from 1575 in 2004-05 to 4266 in 2008-09.**

up several times a week to a kick in the face. He'd leave and always come back.

One time the ex tried to brain him with a VCR.

He didn't want to go to a hospital. He was ashamed of what had happened. He had mixed feelings about his mother staying in her abusive marriage, and here he was doing the same thing.

Melbourne psychologist Elizabeth Cell says there are three misconceptions about male victims: that men must be aggressors, they can take it because they're bigger, and that they must have done something to deserve it. "This is a gross injustice to a man on the receiving end of abusive and violent behaviour, as it simultaneously invalidates his experience while blaming him for the damaging words and behaviour coming his way," she says.

"We would never do this to female victims, yet it seems OK for male victims to be subjected to it."

Emma, a Sydney hospitality worker in her 30s, once broke an ex-boyfriend's nose. She left home at 14 and grew up on the streets, where she had to fight to survive. And so when she started a relationship - and she was only ever attracted to men she knew would never hit her - they would become her family, her everything. Her violence would be triggered by coming down off strong drugs, as well as a cyclical hereditary