

## Victoria's Story

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I met the man who I thought was the 'love of my life' aged 17 and was married for 10 years. At first he was so charming and I believed I was the luckiest person to have him in my life. That all changed very quickly into the relationship. The abuse was mainly emotional but turned to physical abuse near the end of the marriage when he realised he was losing control of me.

I was constantly put down throughout the marriage, name-calling, controlling who I spent time with, (family and friends), control of finances and also being told, "You are mine" and "No-one else would have you". Told often enough, I believed every word he said.

In the weeks before I left he knew he was losing control of me emotionally, he put his hands around my neck and pushed me to the floor telling me he would end my life rather than let me go.

I started trying to find a way out, but with no money and nowhere to go I thought it would be impossible. After yet another threat I decided I had to go that day. I packed an overnight bag for me and my 4 year old daughter and went to a friend who was happy to help.

This was only the beginning of what turned into a nightmare of stalking and harassment from the man I once loved.

I accessed an outreach Service for domestic abuse and with help from the support worker and the police, I was supported every step of the way. The police were concerned about my abuser's increasingly erratic behaviour. He endangered not only my life but that of his daughter's life too. I moved twice in one year to keep us safe and after four arrests for stalking and harassment, he was convicted a year after I left. It was another year later that my support worker encouraged me to contact Wear Valley Women's Aid and ask about volunteering with them. From the moment I walked through the door it felt like it was the place I needed to be. I was offering to help as a volunteer with

the 'Power to Change' programme but I received so much support personally from all the staff, other volunteers and residents and that continues today.

I observe women in similar positions to what I had experienced and how the refuge gives them a safe haven and any support and guidance they may need at that point in their lives. I have had the privilege of seeing participants of the Power to Change ending the programme a completely different person to who began; more confident, assertive and sure they would never return to an abusive relationship.

Life now - five years later- I have just qualified as a professional counsellor and currently volunteer working with women who have suffered domestic/sexual abuse. Myself and my daughter have a lovely, safe, abuse free home.

My message to anyone currently living with abuse is, 'You can do it, freedom from abuse is priceless, asking for help and support will be the best thing you ever do.'