



JACKIE

**STORIES OF
CHANGE**

Be honest
with yourself

“Women in these situations are waiting to be asked.”

I was a professional woman, 27, when I met the guy. I was a doctor.

Looking back it's clear how low my self-esteem was, and this guy made me feel very special. He put me on a pedestal. The first time he was violent with me, I went into shock. It was completely out of the blue. I pretended it didn't happen, and then it happened again. But I was in a difficult situation: he'd moved into my flat, and I felt like I couldn't just pack my bags.

Our relationship lasted two years, but at least a year into it I was planning my escape. It came to a head one day when we were driving home from a barbecue. People had been taking an interest in me – they'd asked about my GP work and seemed very interested. He must have been jealous of that, because on the way home he picked a fight, and as we pulled into the driveway he bashed me around the side of the head, two or three times. I saw red and called the Police. He buggered off, and that was that.

Then I called my mother, and that was the beginning of finding help. She'd known something wasn't right, but I hadn't divulged it. I'd been kidding myself. I'd been pretending that it was a wonderful relationship and I was extremely happy. It was rubbish, absolute rubbish. In hindsight everything is clear. He'd isolated me from my friends, stopped me playing



bridge, even threatened to kill my cat. My mother came with her husband and spent a week with me, which was wonderful. We got a protection order, and ended up having to take him to court, the silly bastard.

Within six weeks of breaking up I met Dave, my husband, and we've been together ever since. It was being with Dave that gave me confidence in myself. That's how I built my life up. He's always given me incredible support. He supported my great leap from GP to breast work, and becoming active in a political



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party. He’s always been a good sounding board, and he’ll tell me when I need to pull my head in.

It’s funny, I grew up always thinking I’d marry a bastard, maybe because my parents didn’t have a wonderful relationship. And I met a bastard, but I didn’t marry him. I married a fantastic guy.

Still, we never talked much about what had happened. I was still incredibly angry with myself. How on earth had I let that happen to me? I was a professional woman, trying to help other people, and I hadn’t even been able to help myself. For years I couldn’t even say his name. It was my shame, and I nurtured it in the back of my mind for over twenty years: I imagine a little red ball – not a heart – that’s pulsing away, and I’m just stroking it, giving it attention, keeping it alive. It didn’t disappear until I told my story publicly in 2011. That was a huge relief. Even people close to me hadn’t really known before then.

It’s gone now, and I don’t really care about it anymore. I’m grateful for where I am in my life and all the fantastic support I’ve had from my family. My daughters have been wonderful. And I understand now that sometimes things happen for a reason. I wouldn’t say I’m grateful it happened, but it’s actually been incredibly helpful to have that experience and understanding in my life. It’s helped me in the work I’m doing now, for example, as the Human Rights Commissioner for Women.

My advice to anyone dealing with domestic violence is to just be honest with yourself. You know it’s not right, so get yourself out. It can happen to anyone, and we all kid ourselves that it’s OK.

I think if there’d been the ad campaigns we have these days, when I was going through this, it could have really made a difference, too. Seeing those ads might have made me think, “No, it’s really not right. I’m kidding myself.” I think education in college can also make a huge difference: age-appropriate





conversations about healthy relationships, what's acceptable and what consent is.

There's a lot to be said for bystander interventions – from people who think that something's not quite right. I was good at fooling everyone, of course, and I never went to work with bruises on my face, but you can't fool everyone forever.

If you do suspect something, for god's sake ask the question: "Are you feeling safe?" That's why

I love the Violence Intervention Programmes being run by the DHBs, because they're giving us more of an opportunity to ask that question. And women in these situations are waiting to be asked. They want to tell their story, at some point, whether it's just happened or years old. Ask the question, and ask it more than once. ●

