

MIKE'S STORY

I do not know whether my story will help others who face the same plight, but if it encourages men who are suffering ill-treatment by their wife or girlfriend to come out of hiding and to seek assistance, you are welcome to use my experience as an example of how not to handle abuse. If I had found outside support when I endured the events I am about to relate, I believe my life may have taken a different, quite probably more harmonious course.

Figuratively speaking I was, however, in a tunnel and alone. I was kept there by my own shame, and a belief that I could and should “be a man” and handle such private matters with no external intervention. I withdrew from interaction with my parents, siblings and relations. My behaviour and lifestyle became reclusive; friends and colleagues were cut out of my private life. My existence, both with my wife and son, and later without them, became insular, with little outside contact.

This is a true story, albeit from my unilateral perspective, but I have tried to remain neutral in my account. There were many more incidents than I relate here, but the idea is not to tell my whole tale. I have chosen examples of the abuse I faced to help illustrate what I went through, not to provoke sympathy, but so that others who empathise may feel empowered to take action on their own behalf, and possibly for their children too.

My wife and I married about a month after the birth of our son. I ought possibly to have thought more about whether our relationship really was healthy before we tied the knot. I preferred to believe that any cracks and imperfections would be resolved by the fairy-tale ending of a wedding. A marriage will not save a bad relationship but it was a combination of social convention, religious background, my conservative upbringing, a feeling of responsibility to my newborn son, as well as a quixotic optimism which cumulatively convinced me of the contrary.

On the morning of our wedding my wife-to-be reached her arm out behind her, wheeled it round hard and slapped me full force across the face. She told me in a stage whisper that she hated me, my family and she hoped we would “all die in a plane crash” then she paused for reflection and added; “no, of cancer. That would be slower and more painful.”

I put it down to pre-nuptial nerves.

During the fandango of the Royal Wedding recently I saw a poster which spoofed the WWII message, stating: “Keep Calm and Marry On”. While I wish William and Catherine all the very best, I had to smile wryly at the attitude I’d displayed that morning, over a decade ago.

Our relationship had been of the whirlwind variety: passionate, tactile, and intense. At the start we made a positive impression wherever we went – a beautiful happy couple, for whom anything seemed possible. We were a radiant pair. We thought we were in love; at least one of us was probably just in lust.

Things had changed, however, when we discovered that a baby was on the way.

I was delighted. She was distraught. She began to behave oddly and a nasty, dark side of her character emerged. She began to tell me that I did not earn enough to keep her, and that I had trapped her. Then I heard that I was not good looking enough, that I was too old for her. This gradually devolved into aggressive verbal outbursts about my odour, my physique and perceived lack of muscle. Derision of my sexual prowess followed, and odious comparisons with that of her former lover. During her pregnancy she declared that she was revolted by the fact that something of me – my son - was actually alive inside her.

Eventually she said she would rather be feared than loved by me.

I took this in my stride; at least I tried to, and I ascribed it to hormonal imbalances due to the pregnancy and subsequent post natal depression. What did I know of such things? I'd read of them, and persuaded myself that things would settle down eventually. After all, they were only outbursts, and she did calm down between these bouts.

Life was getting better: within a period of a month my son had been born, we'd married, I'd both been made redundant and immediately headhunted for a new job - with a 35% salary rise which I thought would help no end. How naïve I was!

The job required that we moved to London from abroad, where we'd lived when we met. We began house hunting with a very large relocation package from my employer. My wife was initially excited at the prospect of living in a "world city" as she put it. She felt that, being a foreigner in London, she could look forward to being perceived as exotic.

However, it turned out that nothing was good enough for her. Even Mayfair and South Kensington – where I could barely afford a single bedroom flat – were not acceptable. Eventually we settled on a three storey town house in a leafy road in SW London. Unfortunately, I was working in SE London, so there was quite a commute, and I alerted her to the fact that I'd be out of the house for long hours – but the location was her choice and I went along with it.

I encouraged her to socialise, to meet people in the area, and suggested that she might like to meet a woman of her own nationality whom I'd met at work. She too had recently come to England and said she'd be glad to make a new friend and to chat in her own language. But my wife reacted badly and coarsely suggested that I was having sex with the woman.

Then my wife claimed that she herself was contemplating having an affair with a neighbour – a man who'd been widowed and owned a house three times the size of ours.

Things went downhill. I was kicked and scratched. Objects were thrown at me – dinner plates, ornaments, anything that lay to hand. Books were ripped up. I was told again that my son was not mine (how could he be, she asked, when he was so good looking?) She declared that she had secretly been communicating with her former boyfriend, who she claimed, was the biological father of our son. To this day I do not know whether there is any truth in either of those assertions, but I assumed there was not, and that she was just being provocative.

Amongst all this I was trying to settle in to my new job, as well as placate our sleepless baby throughout the night. My wife was behaving more bizarrely now. While I never ever saw any maltreatment of our son she certainly turned any and all aggression against me.

She made threats that she would call my place of work and accuse my secretary of having an affair with me. I invited her to my office to meet my colleagues so that she could see for herself what the crowd at work was like – an affable friendly lot. She declined.

I suggested she could meet a group of her fellow countrymen and women locally who had formed an ex-pat club – obviously they spoke her language and would provide a social network. She declined.

She seemed to be on a quest to prove that anything and everything I did was wrong, insensitive or inadequate. The house had too many stairs; the garden was too small; it was too far from my office so I was gone too long during the day; she was lonely and had no friends; I didn't put enough effort into looking after my son; I wasn't well paid enough. The list was seemingly endless. I attempted to address every issue she raised, but as soon as I provided a solution she would find something else amiss. There was never recognition of what I had done, just more demands, and aggression if her problems were not resolved. They never were.

My sister noticed scratches on my face. I said it was from shaving. She did not believe me, as my beard did not grow on my nose, so how on earth did I cut myself there? I changed my story, which just provoked more disbelief. Now I was actually lying to my relations.

When my father rang me just before dinner one night my wife burst in to the room and threw a plate at me. She claimed that I was ignoring her. My father politely ignored the torrent of abuse in the background, and accepted my explanation that she'd dropped some crockery and I'd better hang up. More lies.

One day she hit me so hard on the shin with a solid object (I'm not even sure what it was) that I could see the bone through the wound. For a while I suspected that it was broken, but this was not the case. It certainly hurt enough though. I limped for a while, and told more lies about how it had happened.

Once, in the car en route to Ikea, at about 70 mph she launched into me with whatever was available in the glove box. She hit me about the head, and then thrashed out with her feet. The vanity mirror in the sun visor was smashed, the dashboard fascia was cracked and I could feel blood trickling down my ear. Somehow I managed to stay on the road, and avoid a collision. We did not buy any furniture that day.

One morning – it must have been a Saturday as I was at home for breakfast - my wife opened a letter and demonstratively placed the contents in front of me on the table. She sat back and looked self-satisfied. I was aghast when I saw a brochure from the local family doctor about domestic violence to women. She told me she'd reported me at the doctor's surgery, and that the doctor had suggested that the authorities could intervene. Evidently she'd already spoken with social services. I was dumbstruck when I realised that the truth had been turned on its head, and my wife, the abuser, was actually playing the role of the abused to the outside world.

It was so coldly calculating; she had engineered a way of covering it all up, simply by planting some seeds to suggest that I was the culprit not the victim. No-one would believe that a woman was beating up man would they? Men are stronger. Furthermore she had blown the whistle, so anything I said was going to sound weak and defensive. After all, if I'd been attacked why had I not come forward at the time and said so?

Maybe men are physically stronger, but not all men are violent. I am not violent.

Later, I went to Families Need Fathers and mentioned the abuse I'd suffered. I related how I'd had to restrain my wife and that some light bruising around her wrists displayed evidence of my efforts to hold her back, demonstrating that I was not the abusive one, despite her claims. However, I was warned that bruising round the wrists could be interpreted as my having tied her up. That possible interpretation had not occurred to me.

What could I do? Would anyone believe me?

This was all stacking up as though I were a wife beater. I remained silent, feeling guilty of a crime I had not committed. I began to doubt myself. Perhaps I was the rotten person she claimed after all. I was a senior manager, working a 10 or 11 hour day with up to a 2-hour commute each way, which meant being out of the house frequently for 14 hours or more every working day. Then I was getting up to see to my son during the night, and feed him, so I was exhausted. Yes, I had shouted at her; all married couples have spats; I had lost my temper at her endless demands. Yet I'd not harmed her. There had only been one-way violence: towards me.

My life was insular, and I had no-one to talk to about things; all family and friends had been ostracized and I had no outside point of reference. My perspective was distorted, and remained so for want of an outsider's opinion. It all sounds weird now, but that is how it was. I could not bring myself to speak to anyone about what was happening. I was ashamed, outraged and felt cornered. I had been manipulated into a position where I was to be perceived as the aggressor, while I was in reality being both verbally and physically abused. Now any attempt to defend myself physically could and probably would be seen as aggression on my part.

After five months in England, my wife left with my son and returned abroad to her mother. In time I went to visit. She had indeed become ill. What sick irony that she should contract cancer after her "curse" on my family, which she made on our wedding day?

I visited her in hospital before, during and after her operation. "Now," I thought, "things are on the mend. Things will improve."

I was wrong.

I could only take a few days away from work. After her discharge from hospital we sat in her mother's garden with her brother. I said I was pleased that she'd be able to convalesce in her mother's house, and that she'd be well looked after for the next period. I'd have to fly back to England at the weekend because there were urgent matters at the

office. She said nothing, stood up, took a step back, kicked me with full force in the testicles, and ran into the house screaming very loudly.

Her mother chased after her; her brother sat in his deckchair and looked on passively; I lay on the grass, retching. Gradually I regained my breath, and the urge to vomit receded. I wondered if I'd actually blacked out. When my wife's mother returned to the garden she told me I'd been insensitive, and that her daughter was still delicate after her operation. I remained speechless, wondering whether such a blow had ever proven fatal; it certainly felt as though death had been near me that afternoon. The pain had been excruciating, and I still felt asphyxiated. I was confused. I could not understand why these two people who had witnessed that extremely violent act were behaving in such a blasé fashion.

I returned to England. My wife did not. From this point on we lived separate lives. I continued to visit my son, however, and eventually she rented a flat for herself and our son near her mother's house, for which I paid.

There were many instances of both physical and verbal abuse. Once we took my son to an open air swimming pool. He and I played football together on the grass with a huge beach ball while my wife went for a swim. There was very little skill but lots of giggling. Our time was marred when I had an accident: I cut my foot badly on a broken sprinkler. It was a deep cut and there was a lot of blood but my son was fine about it. I explained that Daddy had hurt his foot and we would now have an adventure. We had to run as fast as we could to the medical centre. He came gambolling along happily enough, and met the nurse who talked to him about cleaning the wound and all about bacteria. By the time we returned from our fantasy land of wounded heroes to the spot where we'd arranged our towels my wife had returned from her swim and became abusive again. Initially she accused me of feigning injury. When I showed her the wound she covered my son's eyes and claimed that I was being an irresponsible father to let him see such things.

She then accused me of deliberately slicing open my foot in order to gain attention and sympathy, and yet later declared to her family that I had deliberately harmed myself, and that my motive was to avoid taking her and our son away on a holiday. This was the first I'd heard of a proposed holiday.

My wife had an amazing and unnerving propensity to invent stories on the spur of the moment. They almost invariably sounded plausible, but were frequently based on pure fantasy. I discovered over the months that she could lie convincingly with no compunction whatsoever, while retaining eye contact, and that she regarded it as a skill of which she was proud. I found it repulsive, and it undermined my faith in her.

When visiting my son I would stay at her flat, initially in his bedroom on a mattress on the floor. We enjoyed time alone in the mornings when he woke early, and we developed a routine of games on the floor, bath and then breakfast. One day, when he was in tears because he had tripped and fallen, my wife accused me of harming him. She would often make a huge fuss of such issues, and immediately ring someone. This time she loudly and animatedly told whomever she'd called – probably her mother - about the suspicion that she had about my relationship with my son, my inability to care for him adequately, and the possibility that I was perhaps interfered with when I was a small boy. The inference to be drawn by her mother, I assume, was that I had potential

paedophilic tendencies. The more I denied such matters the more defensive and less credible I sounded. Such tales seemed to become truth in her mind, and if they were discussed at all her attitude was that there was no smoke without fire. Thus her own inventions moved from rumour to fact in her mind. She then became very convincing when relating her stories to others,

Regretfully, I decided to sleep in the living room after that. Any chance of interaction between me and my son was being undermined. I found it difficult to relax at all at her flat.

That night I was suddenly wrenched from sleep, disoriented, and could not make out what was happening. It was dark. I'd bedded down on a mattress on the living room floor and woke to find someone violently tearing off my underwear. There was loud heavy breathing in the room. Someone was panting, and each exhalation resembled a wolf-like growl. The feral noises were more than alarming, and I grabbed roughly at what I thought was an intruder. When she spoke I realised that it was my wife. This was the most frightening moment I experienced in the entire time I knew her.

She backed off and turned on a lamp. By then I had torn her clothing, and it had left a bruise and a blemish on her arm where the material had pulled against her flesh. She shrieked, pointed smugly, almost triumphantly at the mark on her skin as though it were a trophy, and defiantly retreated to her bedroom declaring loudly that she would inform the authorities and show them the evidence of abuse.

I left the flat that same night and spent the rest of my visit in a local hotel. I found scratches on my chest the next morning, which I had not even felt the night before. It looked bad. She had the mark on her arm, and it looked as if she'd scratched me in defence when I had attacked her. Once again I was put in the position of abuser. Who was going to see the story from my perspective? How could this keep happening? In the event nothing happened.

During another of my visits to my son we went with him to a restaurant. There was an atmosphere due to some issue my wife had raised about insufficient money being paid to her I was already sending her a third of my salary every month, but she was becoming aggressive. It was evidently not enough. I asked her to calm down and not to make a scene. She promptly poured beer over my pizza and spat in my face. My son, who was aged two at the time, mimicked her; he poured his orange juice over the table and also spat in my face, whereupon she laughed callously, applauded him, picked him up, and left the restaurant. She probably laughed again when she picked up 95% of my assets five years later after our divorce settlement. I was not there to see it.

My wife made death threats. She told me her brother knew some people "in the milieu" and that one day I would be approached by a stranger told that I was about to die, shortly before I was killed. She said she wanted me to know that it was at her instigation, but that there would be no evidence.

Looking back on this now it seems laughable, but at the time the threat seemed real. Her abuse was not limited to physical violence; significant damage was inflicted verbally with taunts, insinuations, criticism and threats.

Despite, and during the abuse I remained loyal to my little dysfunctional family and kept things to myself. This persisted until our separation, and inevitable acrimonious divorce. Ironically, despite all the attempts I made for the sake of my son to keep the relationship from becoming a battlefield, I have now not seen him for over 10 years. Stoicism was not the solution to the abuse; it did not resolve itself through silence, and it took other tolls.

At the time I did not see how irrational and unnatural my existence had become. The changes were more gradual and subtle than the way in which they have been related here. I looked for explanations of the sudden violent outbursts. Why was I kicked and scratched suddenly in an unprovoked attack during a walk through the local park with my son in his buggy? I do not believe I will ever find out.

I would have to write a book to encapsulate the sequence of events and to provide sufficient detail to reflect how occurrences led down the lonely path my life took. Perhaps I should write that book, both as a cathartic exercise for myself and for the benefit of those who would attempt, as I did, to face the issue with passive stoicism instead of seeking help to address the underlying issues before the damage is too great to be repaired.

Had my wife and I tackled the issues earlier, many arguments might have been avoided, and a lot of her violence and abuse may never have taken place. As it was we burned too many bridges, and too much trust was undermined by the lies, and the violence of the words and physical attacks.

So there it is: my advice to those who are, understandably hiding, whether from the shame and ignominy, or out of fear of actually being beaten by their wife or girlfriend. While I was seldom afraid of the violence – with which I thought I'd managed to cope – I did suffer deeper wounds. There were stings in the tail. I have lost contact with my son. I have lost my home. I was unable to re-launch of my life. I finished up being treated for depression, lost my job, and have not managed to find an equivalent position since. Perhaps it is a mild form of post traumatic stress disorder. It has certainly lasted a long time.

Had I approached it all differently I might even have retained contact with my son. Now, looking back, I realise that it did not have to be that way. I should have jumped over my pride and asked for help. Then things would probably not have gone so far.

Ends