

THINK BUSINESS, THINK EQUALITY DOMESTIC ABUSE

Case study: Kate

As a result of domestic abuse, Kate has moved from a senior, full-time, permanent job to a low-paid, part-time, temporary one with a different employer. She has had to trade her professional status, income, job security, current and future earnings and pension in order to feel safe at work.

It's a trade-off she shouldn't have had to make. And it's one which her ex-husband never had to contemplate. As far as her job grade, earnings and future prospects go, professionally, she is back in the same place as she was when she started out over 15 years ago.

Kate says, 'I was with my ex-husband for 21 years. From the beginning, although he was quite charming and gregarious, he was also controlling but at that point I didn't see it as abuse. Over time, he became very derogatory towards me, and told me I was worthless and that no-one else would want me. He made me feel like I was losing my mind. He'd say we'd had conversations which we'd never had and deny those we'd had. I felt as if I was going mad. It would come in cycles: everything would be OK for a while and then it would start up again. From the outside we looked like we were a perfect family but we [Kate and her daughter] would be walking on eggshells around him as his behaviour became increasingly unpredictable. He used to tell me that he'd kill himself if he lost me but, over time, that changed to telling me that he'd kill me if I ever left him.

'I was working in a senior position doing a job I was good at and felt confident in, although that had been in decline after my husband joined the same organisation. I can't be sure his



motives for changing employer, but it certainly gave him more access to me and control, which he exploited. He ended up working in close proximity to me and could even come into my office. I was losing confidence at work because, when my husband was working in the building, it brought the fear I had at home into my workplace. His cycle of abuse would always culminate in him apologising and bringing me bunches of flowers. So, he'd bring the flowers to me at work. He'd come in and make show of hugging me but then would whisper threats into my ear, "If you effing tell anyone, I'll ...". He phoned and sent texts of the same nature: he kept me in a state of fear. No-one at work knew what was happening. It was well hidden, and I was really frightened by his threat to kill me if I ever told anyone about what he described as his "darker times". My attendance was OK but when I was at work, I was exhausted and anxious and my moods were unpredictable. I'd burst into tears but I'd blame it on pressure at work.

'I dreamed of a way out for over ten years, waiting for an opportunity. Eventually, it all broke down in a massive incident when he was arrested and then released on bail with restrictions on coming to the house. That was a great relief as, it happening that way, meant that it was taken out of my hands: I didn't have to leave, and the difficult stuff was done for me.

'He pled guilty to threatening and abusive behaviour and received a supervision order and a three-year non-harassment order (NHO). But he is clever. He abided by the NHO but his controlling behaviour continued through the court process, family mediation, divorce, child contact, in public places – and in the workplace. He would take every opportunity to make my life difficult – and that brings a degree of fear into every part of my life.'

Over the weekend, when her ex-husband was in custody, Kate contacted her husband's boss to explain that he wouldn't make it into work on the Monday. Knowing that her workplace



had a domestic abuse policy to protect those experiencing domestic abuse, and to sanction those perpetrating it, Kate also wrote to her HR director disclosing as much as she felt able to, and expecting the policy to be implemented. 'Although I wrote to them and raised the fact that there was a policy to support me, I never got any response to that letter although I was referred to occupational health. I knew the policy covered everything it needed to, and set out all the actions which the employer should take to support me and keep me safe, which is what I expected and wanted, but it wasn't picked up.

'I was off work for a few weeks and assumed that they would prioritise my rights and safety on my return. According to the policy, I'd also expected to have a voice and some input: to be asked to tell my story. I thought that once they'd heard the bigger picture, they wouldn't continue to employ him.

'I came back to work after the leave of absence able and ready to engage in any process but it was all done and dusted. They expected it to be all over. It wasn't malice: it was just ignorance. They thought that the one incident which resulted in court orders was the extent of domestic abuse. They didn't understand about coercive control, and that they were allowing him to continue to manipulate me at work. I don't know if they even discussed the domestic abuse fully with him as they refused to share any records of the disciplinary hearing. But they didn't ask me to contribute to it or use my disclosure letter.

'They also said a risk assessment had been done, but I wasn't involved in it, and so I had no say in planning for my own safety.

'The safety plan was limited to saying that we should park in separate car parks, and that he was not allowed to come into my office. I was grateful that they'd done that but I was still



terrified as none of it was legally binding. I'd often find his car parked next to mine when I left work; and if I went to the loo, I'd bump into him. It made it impossible to function at work. A year down the line I got an agreement that I'd be told if he'd be in my area of work, and I would then be expected to take annual leave if I wanted to avoid him. I was also allowed to lock my office door as my office was in a quiet corner of the building. But over time, any safety measures they put in relapsed or were forgotten.

'My manager did her best to be sympathetic but she didn't always say the right thing. Saying "Oh but he didn't hit you" or comparing her experiences to mine wasn't helpful. It wasn't listening to me. It felt like she was simply defending the organisation's position.

'The disciplinary hearing resulted in a written warning, which expired after a year. He was able to minimise what happened and put it down to one event fuelled by alcohol. It felt as if my employers colluded with him. They should have invited me to participate and should have taken a statement from me. They should have had a woman on the panel or at least someone who knew about coercive control. All the ideas I had about what might help me feel safe at work were dismissed. So, it felt like everything was trivialised: they thought it was a one-off event. They had checked my Marac1 score – a massive breach of confidentiality – and although my manager knew nothing about domestic abuse or risk assessment, she concluded from the score that it "wasn't that serious". I felt that was stepping over a huge boundary and didn't think they should have done that.'

Overall, Kate's employer fell far short of the mark and indeed, the provisions of its own domestic abuse policy. 'They should have relocated him and listened to me. They did neither. They didn't respond to my disclosure; they didn't follow the policy; they didn't keep in touch with me when I was off sick; for all the risk assessment they did, they didn't manage the



risk; they didn't enable me to have a voice; checking my Marac¹ score breached my confidentiality.

'There was a section in the policy which spoke about risk assessment, and it gave a great long list of things they could have provided. They could have moved my ex- husband to a different building – that would have had no effect on his job whatsoever but would have made a big difference to me. They could have done things like ask reception to raise the alarm if they saw him in the building; and had a photo of him in security for staff who didn't know him.

'But they didn't do any of those things, and it was disempowering for me [and empowering for him], and there were times when I was really distressed and retraumatised. I would have panic attacks, freeze and be frightened. That sanctuary of work became a place of fear. I lost trust in my employer. It definitely made my recovery worse, slower, harder. My mental health is still poor although better, and I am coming to the tail end of treatment. Quite early on, my psychiatrist wrote to my employer saying "you are keeping this person unwell – the way you are managing it is not helping her wellbeing". My employer dismissed that.'

Kate says that one positive response from her employer was the referral to occupational health which 'was the right thing to do. It was a means by which my manager could understand the health impact at least.

'Although I could have raised a grievance because of my very senior position in the hierarchy,

¹ Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference: meeting to discuss how to help victims at high risk of murder or serious harm.



I had limited scope as to who I could approach. And I was exhausted. From the responses I'd had I didn't think the end result would be any different, and I didn't want to put myself through any more. So, I eventually ended up long-term sick and didn't go back. I left because they compounded the domestic abuse by their response. I felt let down by them. I'd worked for them for ten years; it felt like it was a strong working relationship; and they let me down.'
1 Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference: meeting to discuss how to help victims at high risk of murder or serious harm.

The response of her employer, in addition to the domestic abuse, has affected Kate in many ways, employment- and pay-related and otherwise. 'I'm still working in my profession but in a temporary, much less senior, and less well-paid job with part-time hours. While that's great for my mental health, it's not for my income. I left a well- paid job with accrued benefits and pension, and my net pay has reduced by half, which will have long-term consequences. There has been no corresponding loss for my ex-husband. He's in the same job, with the warning expunged.

'My self-confidence isn't good because of my ex-husband's abuse but that's compounded by my experience at work. I lost confidence in my abilities, and my career is probably back to where it was 15 years ago.'

For her employer's part, they have lost a dedicated, experienced worker, and sent a dubious message to their workforce. And the perpetrator has learned he can do pretty much as he wants. 'I think he felt vindicated. It felt like they didn't believe me and colluded with him. He strutted around like [...]. A written warning which lasted a year had no enduring impact on him.'



What could have been done differently? Kate says that her employer should have, ‘Listened to me, believed, spoken realistically about what they could and couldn’t do and signposted. They should have made sure that there was some kind of written response to my initial letter which said: thanks for telling us; this is what we will do; and your safety will be our first priority. In not listening to my story, they didn’t get the full picture. And in not understanding about domestic abuse, they didn’t take the right action although I’m sure they think they did the right things.

‘From my employment perspective leaving my job was the best thing. But from an ethical perspective, I shouldn’t have had to go. But I left on good terms which is important for my new job and joint work. And I’m in a safe place, with great security. I’m still in recovery, still on antidepressants and in therapy but I’m living without violence and, as my psychiatrist says, “You don’t recover from 20 years of abuse in three”.

‘For any employer/HR professional, the vital aspects are to listen, and to update the victim/survivor. Even if it’s to say they haven’t done anything yet: saying that is better than saying nothing. Also, to understand about coercive control: domestic abuse is not an isolated incident. It never is, and “incidents” should not be the focus.

‘Employers need to realise how easily they can collude with the perpetrator, and learn more about domestic abuse. I can guarantee that it’s not what they think it is.

‘Employers need to be more accountable for supporting victim/survivors of domestic abuse and to make sure they have a voice, for example through involvement in processes,



advocacy, victim statements. I also think there should be better links between police, courts and employers.’

Kate’s current employer has been far more assiduous about her safety and wellbeing at work than her previous one. ‘At interview I told them what was happening. They were able to talk me through what security there was in the building, and were really reassuring. They were happy to support me. I left my previous employer with a long list of things they could do better next time, and I hope they will be taken on board.

‘The experience has made me re-assess what I want to do with my life. I’ve lost my passion for my profession but I have a massive passion for using my experience to contribute to changing the employer response to others. I want other women to know that they shouldn’t try to fight this sort of thing on their own. If their employer doesn’t listen, they should find someone to advocate for them. I’d always been very independent, and thought that I’d manage, but I felt like I was on my own. I could have had more of a voice if I’d understood about advocacy, and had asked Women’s Aid for that. But society has to change. It did feel like a lot of the battles I was fighting were way bigger than me. I was a victim of society in many ways because of the lack of understanding about coercive control.’

