

'I NEEDED TO GET AWAY OR I WAS GOING TO DIE'

Melanie, 32, suffered violence for 15 years at the hands of her boyfriend. Now she helps women going through the same ordeal...

When you're a teenager you just think about the here and now; you don't think about the future or whether you're dating the kind of person you want to spend your life with.

I met Jack* when I was 14. Even from the beginning, he was very controlling. He would make an issue if I wanted to see my friends and would always call to check where I was. I was so young, I wasn't mentally equipped to deal with the manipulation and by the time I turned 16, the relationship had become more serious.

Early signs

My parents didn't like Jack, but I was stubborn and wanted to rebel. He had his own flat, so I'd go round to see him there; he rarely came to my house. The first sign of Jack's violent streak was when he smashed a mirror with a hammer during an argument. I'd never seen anyone behave like that before, so I was really

frightened, but I stayed and eventually he calmed down and apologised. I didn't tell my parents what had happened.

Afterwards, I did think about leaving him a few times, but he would get on his hands and knees, crying. I'd always feel sorry for him and believed he'd change. Then at 19, I got pregnant and Jack wasn't supportive at all - in fact he became nasty, saying he'd make sure the baby was taken away. Even after our son arrived, he was so irresponsible; he couldn't keep a job, never had money to help out with the baby and although he said he'd find somewhere for us to live, that never happened either. Eventually, I moved out of my parents' house into a mother and baby unit, then got my own council flat.

Angry outbursts

For a while afterwards, things got better, but it wasn't long before he turned violent towards me again. He would push me into furniture, try to strangle me, kick me and slam my head into the wall. He'd tell me I was stupid and use words I didn't understand on purpose just to mock me. I wouldn't let him move in with me, which became one of the biggest issues of our relationship. So he would come round to visit the baby and stay over some nights, but I'd often tell him to leave.

It was when I was pregnant with my daughter at 23 that things got really bad. He would get angry and choke me, pin me up against the wall until I had red, raw strangulation marks around my neck. I would wear polo necks to hide the evidence and just change the subject if my mum asked questions.

After each outburst, Jack was always so apologetic and would wear me down emotionally to the point where it was just easier to take him back. If I tried not to speak to him, he would sneak into my house, or sleep outside in his car to catch me when I did the school run. He'd call again and again and leave messages. The times when I did feel brave, he would revert to trying to strangle me to control me.

My best friend encouraged me to go to the police, but I was scared they'd take

my children away. I loved my kids so much and I wanted to do better - I felt like I was failing them as a mother. They were the only joy in my life and the one thing that kept me going. I started taking evening classes and eventually I managed to get a diploma in childcare and was able to get a job.

Another chance

A while after I had my daughter, I got pregnant again, but lost the baby after Jack was aggressive towards me. After that, I stood my ground about not taking him back and told him he needed to get help. He did do everything under the sun to show he had changed. We'd meet up and just talk and he'd be really attentive - even my friends noticed a difference. Eventually, I agreed to give him another chance and for a year, everything was fine. I finally thought I was getting my happily ever after. But things turned again when I got pregnant with my youngest son in 2013.

I was five months pregnant and busy trying to get the kids' breakfast ready when Jack came downstairs and started shouting at me. He sent the children upstairs and jumped on my back, put his arm round my throat and choked me. He took me to my knees and I couldn't breathe for the longest time. I felt all my reactions and pulse

'He would wear me down emotionally to the point that it was just easier to take him back'

slowing down and genuinely thought he was going to kill me. It finally clicked; I needed to get away or I was going to die.

Jack had called the school and told them the kids weren't coming in; but hours later I managed to convince him I needed to go out and get something for them to eat. I was terrified to leave the kids with him, but as soon as I got out of the house, I called a friend, who took me straight to the police station. I made a statement and Jack was arrested that day.

He told the police a completely

different story about what happened and was released on bail until his court date three months later. When it came around, I was eight months pregnant and had to give evidence. It was terrifying, but I was allowed to do it behind a screen so Jack and I couldn't see each other. I held it together, but as soon as I got outside, I broke down in tears.

'When I was five months pregnant, he jumped on my back, put his arm around my throat and choked me'

The judge found Jack guilty and he had to attend a domestic abuse programme and was given a 12-month suspended sentence. There was also a restraining order to prevent him seeing the kids or me indefinitely. He has broken the restraining order once when he turned up at our door with a note saying he wanted to see the kids. He was taken to court and had to pay a fine and if he turns up again, he could face five years in jail - it's reassuring that the law is on my side.

If Jack wanted to see the kids legally, he'd have to go through the courts, but they don't want to see him anyway. After he was arrested, my son told me there had been times when Jack had beaten him too. And of course they witnessed his abuse towards me.

Starting over

After the sentencing, I asked the council to help me move, so we could start again somewhere new. Since then, the kids and I have all flourished. They're doing great in school and I have a job as a carer. I have also met a wonderful man called Mark, who is great with the children and I totally trust him. We were married last year in a beautiful service.

I now volunteer with Refuge to help other women who are going through similar situations. Although I didn't use the charity myself until after I got away from Jack, it helped me learn that what I had been through wasn't my fault and to stop blaming myself for not leaving sooner. I used to feel so guilty for letting my kids down and not protecting them; but now I wake up feeling at peace because I feel like the mum they should have always had. We've finally found our happy ending.

* www.refuge.org.uk

