

'It's not the home I wanted to give my children': Relationship turns violent in lockdown



Caleb Carnie/Stuff

A domestic violence survivor opens up about her nightmarish experience in lockdown.

Three weeks into lockdown, the tensions bubbling beneath the surface of Natalie's* home erupted into violence. Here is her story.

Until lockdown, Natalie had been on the fence about the relationship. "Separation had been on the cards, but I was more on the side of staying together for the kids."

Natalie had found ways to minimise the chance for conflict. That meant leading separate lives: when the

couple weren't at work, they'd take turns to care for their preschool children, spend time with different friends, and pursue their own interests.

But forced together in lockdown, avoiding each other was no longer an option, and the atmosphere in the house became charged as the couple juggled work and childcare.

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"He is more stressed than usual, partly because things have been uncertain with work. He gets incredibly short tempered and aggressive, and takes it out on me on the kids.

"I feel really awful, it's not the home I want to give my children, I'm constantly having to pacify the kids, and him, and work full time."



Sydney Sims/Unsplash

Domestic violence cases have spiked during the pandemic, as couples who have learnt to get by have suddenly been confined to their homes.

Then, an argument turned physical, and her partner pushed her. The pair tussled, and Natalie ran to the bedroom to call the police.

The police issued a police safety order, instructing her partner to leave the house for 48 hours. The time allowed Natalie space to take a breath and reflect.

It wasn't the first violent incident. "About a year ago, he called me a f***ing b**** in front of the kids and pushed me hard enough to make me stumble. It wasn't just the push, it was the language in front of my kids."

That time, she didn't call for help. "I wasn't sure what the consequences would be, so I didn't call the police. It was the unknown, it was scary."

At the beginning of April, Women's Refuge reported that centres around the country were at peak capacity due to a surge in domestic violence incidents. Around the same time, [Canterbury police figures](#) showed that nearly two family harm incidents were being reported every hour.

When Natalie's partner returned from his 48 hour standdown, his behaviour improved.

"He has not been screaming and swearing as much, and he has been calmer with the kids. It's opened his eyes to the fact I'm not going to tolerate it, and he saw that the police were on my side.

"He's always said, 'well, I've never hit you'; it's shown him that [pushing and shouting] wasn't acceptable."

But she knows the situation could change at any time, and she's making firmer plans to leave.

In lockdown, there's not a lot she can do, Natalie said. But she has made peace with that. "I felt like I had too many decisions to make in a stressful time; there's so much I'm going to have to deal with, this feels like the calm before the storm."

RADIO TARANA

Women's Rights Commissioner Saunoamaali'i Karanina Sumeo talks to Radio Tarana news editor Sanjesh Narain on the increase of domestic violence during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Natalie knows that to most people, the answer is simple: if there's violence, you leave.

However, leaving with the children for a Women's Refuge, or applying for a protection order could mean a protracted battle in the Family Court, she said.

"[My partner] has said in the past, 'you won't have custody of the kids, I'll make sure they know you caused this'. I don't want to piss him off that much that he drags this out through court.

"The thought of my fate and my children's fate being out my hands is something I'm not comfortable with. All I can do is book mediation, and ride it out.

"And I know people will have objections, but he is their dad. I don't want to deny his relationship in their life."

Women's Refuge communications manager Susan Barker said on average, it takes seven attempts to leave an abusive relationship.

"It's extremely difficult, and given the lockdown circumstances it's even more difficult than it was before."

A few factors had contributed to the rise in family violence during the lockdown period, Barker said. "A common technique abusers use is constant monitoring and control, so the lockdown is the perfect storm as no one has the opportunity to go out."

Add working from home and childcare to the mix, and tensions quickly mount.

"If you think about the stresses we are all under at the moment, it's extremely stressful. If your relationship has red flags already, [lockdown] is going to work as a pressure cooker."

For some couples, living together 24/7 has highlighted behaviour that might not have been evident before in a relationship, Barker said.

"If people go out every day it's going to be harder to see. But when you're in lockdown 24/7, you're going to see a lot more of that negative behaviour."

Barker advises women who weren't ready to leave an abusive partner to stay in close touch with friends and family. "The more you're isolated from those people, the more likely you will second guess your own thinking and feeling."

She encouraged women to call the Women's Refuge.

"You don't have to make any decisions. Women should know we are there for them no matter what. If they go back, that's their choice. There's no limit on how many times you can contact us."



MANDY TE/STUFF

Mediator Timothy McMichael says the lockdown had been a trigger point for many relationships.

Family mediator Timothy McMichael said for some couples, the lockdown had "turned up the speed" on an inevitable separation process.

"[The situation is] a trigger point for bringing about something that probably would have happened anyway.

"If you have made that decision or separated within the bubble, it's tough. Maybe they were on that journey of separation anyway but now they have to stay together."

The most useful thing couples can do during this time is to register for family dispute resolution (FDR), he said.

Unless there was an urgent need for a protection order, mediation was possible in a relationship where there had been family harm, McMichael said.

However, it was important that every effort was made to keep both parties safe, he said.

While court buildings remain closed, the Family Court's FDR service was still available for couples remotely. Couples can attend FDR sessions via Zoom or Skype. They can opt to stay in separate rooms, communicating with their partner through the mediator.

McMichael acknowledged that attending resolution while caring for young children was difficult. However, couples could still get the ball rolling by arranging a pre-mediation meeting, which only one partner needed to attend, he said.

Separating is difficult in any circumstances, so couples should be kind to themselves, he said.

"While you're dealing with these tough things, try not to make too many future plans. It's so tough emotionally and psychologically anyway. So unless there's a real urgency ... just do what you can do."

"People are always thinking about the kids, about dividing assets; people don't actually grieve. You're talking about those lost hopes and dreams.

"That grieving process needs to take place. And that's really difficult when people are living under the same roof."

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