

Helping victims of **domestic abuse**

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Mary's Story

When Mary found her one-year-old daughter about to put a used bag of cocaine in her mouth she realised it was finally time to leave.

Being head-butted twice by her drug-addicted husband the day before she was due to give birth had not made her flee, the 25-year-old had got used to the unpredictable, sporadic violent rages that came to define their two-year marriage. Her husband's carelessness around their only daughter had been "the final straw". Mary had left their family home in Bournemouth once before but he persuaded her to return to give their marriage another go. However her second "flight" was for good.

Mary arrived at Poole Women's Refuge seven months ago with only one suitcase, and holding on to her precious daughter Anna. She had no food or nappies for her baby and was in a distraught state when she arrived late in the evening after another of her husband's violent episodes. She was greeted at the refuge by the night support worker and spent an hour chatting before being shown to her new flat within the refuge. As she laid her baby daughter to sleep she realised it was a new beginning and that she finally had the strength to stay at the refuge and create a new life for herself and her daughter. The high security refuge gave her the safety that she longed for, it also gave her the foundations to begin her new self sufficient life without her husband. Mary received counselling and guidance on housing, Anna attended play sessions within the refuge and gradually their confidence increased.

"This is never happening to me again," she said. "I have walked away from everything - the life I made, my home, my friends. I had a black eye when I gave birth to my daughter

and I pretended to his family I had walked into a cupboard, I am now in control of my destiny and my daughter's."

Mary had survived so much abuse since the couple first met in the Far East where she was working. She described herself as the young and impressionable woman, and him as the charming older man - he was 42 at the time.

After their baby daughter was born the violence became more frequent as he became increasingly volatile. While Mary wanted to go out and make new girlfriends, her husband was becoming more paranoid, possessive and aggressive. She had also discovered he was secretly taking drugs and lying to her about money - they are still more than £5,000 in debt. To avoid his anger, Mary changed from the effervescent, gregarious young woman she had once been to a shy and timid woman with no self confidence.

Making the break

"I stopped wearing make-up and nice clothes," she explained. "I could not bear the thought of anyone looking at me because I could not bear him getting angry and interrogating me about other men." Her time at the refuge has given her fresh hope and confidence about her and Anna's future.

"Staying at the refuge has been one of the best experiences of my life. I have made so many new friends and within just a few weeks I felt my old personality returning." Her advice to the other women still living in fear and suffering in silence is frank: "Stop fooling yourself, lying to yourself - 'bite the bullet', you are strong enough to leave."