

CHAPTER EIGHT HEALING THE HURTS

'To give up power and control leads to richer relationships. I cannot have a full and rich relationship with people that fear me, it is as simple as that. If men are controlling their partners through fear, they are sure as hell doing it to each other

It is important to understand that men use power and control to avoid feeling hurt. Anger and the violence that follows are secondary emotions.

What happens is that if our expectations of power, or authority, or service from women, for instance, are being challenged and not being met, then that threatens our idea of being a man. Then we are not really a man and "If I am not a real man, then what am I? It's like I may as well be dead." Because of some socially constructed belief systems we interpret those moments as life-threatening and that is why we are violent.'

(Trevor, quoted in *Will the Real Mr New Zealand Please Stand Up?*, Gwendoline Smith, p. 84)

Like many men, Trevor has come to realise that his sense of being a man is based on having power over others, and that there is a huge cost in adhering to the Old Rule Book. He acknowledges that, if our sense of who we are is based on the Old Rule Book, we are preventing ourselves from achieving close, intimate relationships with others.

In this chapter we will explore what you need to do in order to put abuse behind you and take others along with you in the process. This involves two important processes:

the first is looking at genuine apologies, and the second is resignation from the Abuse Club. However, a word of caution. Others may not be ready or prepared to hear or trust your wish to be different. Remember those past promises that you have made to act differently? Promises are only believed when they are actioned.

By now you will be aware of the impact your abusive behaviour and self-righteous anger has on yourself and those around you. Having changed, you may want to distance yourself from past behaviours, make a new start, and embark on your new lifestyle. This may work for you, but others are left with the long-term effects of having lived with abuse. Those around you will need to be set free from feelings of responsibility for abuse (remember all of those blaming statements you have made over the years?) and begin to heal for themselves.

One of the questions men often ask is: 'Now that I have changed, why don't others get on with life, and forgive and forget?' I invite you to take responsibility for earning the right to respect, and not be caught up in your own needs to have the situation settle down in a way that you want. Are you prepared to allow family members and others to proceed at their own pace, or do you want them to fit in with your pace? Will you exert pressure on them to forgive and

forget, or are you prepared to live with their need to forgive and forget in their own time? This may not be easy; it will be a real test and demonstration of your determination to change.

If you put the pressure on — like you did when you were being abusive — others will perceive you as not having changed and not having taken their needs into account.

Letter of Responsibility

Alan Jenkins, in his book *Invitations to Responsibility*, has developed a useful framework for a letter of responsibility to those affected by abuse. He states that letters of responsibility need to be written clearly and be free from invitations to shift the responsibility for abuse onto others.

Responsibility letters are not the opportunity to convince others that what you did was okay, dragging out all those reasons to justify your past actions. They offer the chance to state what you have done, your understanding about the impact that this has had on others, what you are doing about it, and your future intentions.

The Old Rule Book teaches men that apologising is an admission of weakness. I would like you to consider a different way of viewing an apology. It takes a great deal of courage and strength to face up to your part in the story and demonstrate that you are now taking responsibility for your actions.

Hiding behind dishonesty is not strength; it is weakness of the highest order. Others know and see this. The strong men I know are able to accept their part in the situation and, as they often say, ‘Walk the talk.’

Let us consider the letter that Fred (50) wrote to his wife June (51), who had left him three months previously.

Dear June, I am writing this letter to you because of my concern for you and how sad I feel about what I have put you through in the past twenty years of our married life. I am very sorry for how I have threatened you, verbally abused you, restricted who you could see and not supported you in your role of being a mother to our children.

I now understand that I was not man enough to be clear about how to be a proper husband and dumped on you all my frustration about my own feelings of inadequacy. I thank you for leaving (you know I didn't at the time) because I have learnt to face up to myself and who I am as a person.

It is now clear that I am responsible for the abuse I inflicted upon you. I was not a responsible and respectful husband to you. I should have taken up your suggestions to seek help but my pride, or what I thought was pride, got in the way.

I now have a beginning appreciation of how hard life has been for you. You must have been terribly frightened of my anger and abuse. I chose not to connect your regular trips to the doctor for depression with the way I acted towards you. By ignoring this I put my needs ahead of yours, not valuing you for who you are. I was not sensitive to your feelings, only my own. It must have been hard for you living with me, always on the go, involved in my clubs and societies, always the respected person out there in the world, while at home I was a bastard. I would have felt cheated if I was in your shoes.

I also now realise that I dumped my problems onto you instead of looking at what was going on for myself. You carried the responsibility for what were my issues which I now understand as me not wanting to face up to the years of abuse.

You may be surprised to hear this after all the times you have taken the risk to encourage me to go to counselling, but I have just attended a group for men who have abused others. It was difficult for me to face myself but I am learning and understanding more about myself, what it was like for you and Jamie, Kate and Trish, and how I can be different.

Every day I have to keep reminding myself of how I can be respectful to others, but am very aware of how fragile this new way of thinking is for me. I have had fifty years of being a bully and for the first time in my life can admit how scared I feel about being old and alone, cut off from my family. This could be the cost of how I have behaved.

I intend to be responsible for my own feelings and behaviours and have decided that I want to be a fun grandfather for my grandchildren when they arrive. I intend to keep working on myself to understand how I tick. I am also going to talk with Jamie, in particular, about how I have acted in my life because I see him going down a similar road that I went down and I don't want this for him. I'll also send Kate and Trish a letter and invite them to talk with me.

I am hesitant to ask you to meet with me but I would like to talk with you about what I now understand. I realise that you may not want to do this after what I have put you through. I am open to doing this with a counsellor if this would feel safer for you. I will respect whatever decision you make.

June, I am truly sorry. I know that in the past I have said sorry many times. This time I feel I can say it in a way that is genuine.

Fred

In this letter Fred has managed to resist the temptation to find excuses for his behaviour, clearly claiming responsibility for his abusive behaviour. He has also been able to look at the wider picture, the impact on June and their three children, as well as clearly stating his intentions for the future. He has also respected June's choice whether to respond or not. The framework for such a letter is important. It is very easy to slip back into the old blaming, trivialising and sidetracking from the issues. This is a letter of responsibility, not a chance to write down all the excuses for why you acted in a certain way. Following are examples of the type of statements that you will find helpful, and a step-by-step way to cover the important issues.

Framework for a Letter of Responsibility

1. Reason for Writing

This is a statement about your concerns and caring for those who have been on the receiving end of abusive behaviour. Stay with statements that talk about yourself such as 'I am writing to you because I feel ... about what I have put you through.'

2. Statement of Apology

It is important to detail the types of abuse that you have used. This conveys to the other person that you are neither trivialising or trying to trivialise your behaviour. For example 'I am very

sorry for verbally abusing you, hitting you, threatening you.’ This section should include all of the behaviours on the Power and Control Wall (Chapter 1, page 14).

Acknowledge that you have avoided facing up to these issues and exactly how you have done that: ‘I avoided facing up to the seriousness of my abusiveness and violence towards you by saying things like “If you were different then I wouldn’t get so angry.” I now understand that this put the responsibility and blame onto you. Also, I now understand that I used anger as an excuse. It was easier to say I was angry than to say I was abusive or violent.’

3. Statement of Responsibility

Clearly state who was responsible for the abuse and why:

‘It was my fault that I was abusive, not yours.

‘I am a man and as such need to be responsible for acting in respectful ways towards you.

‘I should not have subjected you to my reign of terror. No one should have to put up with this type of behaviour.’

Also acknowledge what should have happened:

‘I should have found a more respectful way to deal with my feelings of fear and inadequacy, instead of expecting others to do the worrying and look after my issues.’

Affirm the choices that partners or others have made to remove themselves from a situation or to reach out for help:

‘I think you did the right thing in leaving.’

‘By contacting that counsellor you have said enough is enough. I realise it must have taken a lot of courage to do that, knowing how I would react.’

4. Statement about Understanding the Impact

The importance of this section is to show what you understand about the impact of your behaviour on others. Until you can do this it is likely others will not trust your changes. An important part of your process of change is being able to put yourself in others’ shoes. This lets you make sense of their reactions, attitudes and behaviour:

‘I am now beginning to understand how hard it has been living with me.’

‘You must have been frightened when I came home drunk, not knowing what sort of mood I would be in. ‘It must have been hard for you when I dumped all the blame for what was going on on you.’

‘You must have felt trapped by my abusive attitude and behaviour towards you.’

5. Statement of What You are Doing about It

In the past you may have made promises that things would be different next time. These promises are genuine at the time but, because they are not followed up with specific action to effect change, they are not kept. Where mistrust exists in a relationship as a result of abusiveness, partners, family, friends and acquaintances want to know what is going to be different:

‘I am going off to a counsellor His name is I have told him that I am going to work through my issues and give you the space and time to deal with yours. I won’t hassle you about how much time it takes or how much it costs.’

6. Recurrence of the Problem

This is a safety back-up and conveys to the other person how serious you are prepared to be about the changes you are making:

‘In the past I have avoided facing up to what I have done. This time I am going to face up to what I have done and the consequences. Even if this means pleading guilty if I am ever charged with assault again.’

‘If I am ever in a position where I am likely to be a threat to you or the children, I’ll take time out, which means I will leave and not come back until I can guarantee I can be safe to be around.’

‘If I am ever verbally abusive to you or the children again, I will take responsibility for myself by going to stay with my brother I have talked this through with him and he is aware of the situation.’

‘If I am moody I will take time out until I can be with you and the children in a way that doesn’t upset or worry you.’

7. Statement of Future Intent

This is important as it reminds you and others about what your intentions are:

‘I will never hit you again.’

‘I will respect you for who you are and allow you the freedom to be your own person.’

‘I will not try to control you in any way and will negotiate with you about issues that I have trouble dealing with or accepting.’

Exercise



Now write your responsibility letter to those affected by your abuse. Check it carefully to make sure there are no excuses or blaming in it. Use the Respect Test to measure its appropriateness. Have one of your support team members read it over to check that there is nothing in it that is not genuine. Writing letters of responsibility can take a bit of getting used to, so keep at it. They are not easy to write so you may have to have a couple of attempts to get it right.

Resigning from the Abuse Club

Have you had enough? Is it time to put abuse behind you, or do you want to keep your options open? You have found that the reasons for belonging to the Abuse Club are no longer valid. You had little choice about joining — membership is free when you are born male — but you can make the decision to resign now that you are an adult.

So what will you do? Stick with full membership, associate membership or resign completely? This can be hard, especially if your sense of who you are has been based on the bully role that I talked about in the introduction. Letting go of a lifestyle of abuse is like saying goodbye to

an old friend. The friend may have got you into a great deal of trouble but you have been through a lot together, like real buddies or mates.

Remember also that there were pay-offs or benefits in being a member. You often got what you wanted in the short term, unfortunately at the expense of others. Men often tell me that they struggle with walking away from this friend, yet they know they have walked away from many other obstacles in the past and survived.

Be aware of what might be getting in the way of you resigning from the Abuse Club and waving that old friend or friends goodbye.

Questions to Ponder

- What do I fear most about resigning from the Abuse Club?
- What feelings and thoughts do I have about walking away from the Abuse Club?
- Will people respect me more, or less, for having resigned from the Abuse Club?
- Which of my friends will try to convince me to renew my membership?
- What will I say to them about my reasons for resigning?

More and more men are resigning from the Abuse Club because they are sick and tired of the hassles that their membership causes. Like those around them, they have recognised that continuing with membership will have dire consequences for themselves and others. I figure that at the time of writing this book, the Abuse Club secretary is probably overloaded with resignations. If they continue at this rate I am sure the club will worry about its long-term chances of surviving. I guess one or two of the old diehards might stay with it to the end.

One day John, one of the men in a group I ran, brought the following letter in to read to us. He had left this letter on the fridge as a constant reminder of his commitment to a non-abusive lifestyle.

The Secretary

The Abuse Club

Dear Secretary and Committee Members

I have decided after much thought to resign from the Abuse Club. I know I have been a member from a very young age, but I now find that I have outgrown what the club can offer me. I have also questioned over the past few months the very attitudes, principles and beliefs that the club is based on.

The aims of the Abuse Club have done little for me in helping me get along with others. They have got in the way, causing more pain than pleasure. This includes not just my own anguish, but that of my family and close friends. I can no longer live with the Old Rule Book and keep my self-respect as a man.

My intentions are to join a new club that has started up called the Respectful Relaters, which has a very interesting charter and code book. It is more geared to what my needs are in today's world.

Yours faithfully

John

It is important to mark changes such as resigning from the Abuse Club. I encourage men to think about what kind of ritual they would like to have to acknowledge the magnitude of this decision. Some men want to celebrate with members of their family, friends and supporters of the Respectful Relaters Club. Others want to develop an appropriate ritual to signal the changes and alert others to the importance of this decision. Some men will make a public statement to people who are important to them. This is useful, a bit like a person who has given up smoking telling others. This invites others to be supportive, and is a reminder to keep up with the work needed to maintain a non-abusive lifestyle. Whatever you choose to do, call upon others to share the moment — invite the support team you named at the beginning of this book.

The following questions will help you decide on what process you will use to plan your resignation and declaration ritual.

- Who would I like to share this important ritual with?
- What am I wanting to achieve by this ritual?
- Are there certain things I will want to acknowledge? (The impact on myself, on others, my commitment to a non-abusive lifestyle.)
- What do I want to say to those around me?
- Where will I hold this important event?

Summary

You have been through a lot to get to the point where you can apologise to others for your past behaviour towards them. Your apology will be genuine because of the behind-the-scenes work that you have put in. It will not be just another ‘I’m sorry’ followed by a return to the old pathway. Your ritual will be a clear signal to others and yourself about your commitment to unshackling yourself from the Old Rule Book. The challenge from here on is how to maintain the changes you have made. We will look at this in the next chapter