

CHAPTER NINE

RESISTING THE INVITATION TO RETURN TO THE OLD WAYS

I definitely notice some changes in my behaviour and attitude problems because of the awareness but I have noticed lately, only in the last week or two, to some degree both of those things have started to creep back. I don't seem to be having the severity of the problems that I had before I went on the course.

Harvey (aged 55)

By now you will have made significant changes in your life, in the way you view others, and in how you act towards them. The next challenge is to maintain these changes without relapsing into old patterns. When you have spent most of your life acting in certain ways those patterns remain strong and it takes time for the new to outweigh the old.

In this chapter we will explore how to avoid relapsing into abusive patterns of behaviour and stay with the new non-abusive lifestyle. We now move on to the last level in the process of change, Level 7, which is all about maintenance of the changes you have made. This involves being aware of the invitations and urges to slip back into old patterns of behaviour, and developing and building a support system around you that can sustain you on your journey.

In addition, having a safety plan in place is critical because old patterns don't give up that easily. If you can plan for an eventuality then you will have control and can act differently. You will also be an important resource to others who you will recognise may be at the starting point of their journey towards a non-abusive lifestyle. You can be of use sharing your own story with other men, explaining the difficulties you had, and how you overcame these difficulties.

Maintaining Changes

The importance of maintaining change has been undervalued as a critical issue in the change process. I see it as crucial if the changes made are to be ongoing or long-lasting. The issue is how to stay on the non-abusive pathway without reverting back to the old ways. Take Mike, for example.

Mike had been on one of my groups and had made significant changes. He had grown up in a very abusive household and had done well to break this tradition with his own wife. Mike had continued to come to an ongoing support group after attendance at a

Stopping Violence Programme. I hadn't heard from Mike for about six months when he phoned me in a distressed state. I saw him immediately.

Mike told me that life was wonderful for a while, with him enjoying his new-found non-abusive way to resolve issues. Over the summer, however, the situation had deteriorated with Mike and Sue (his wife) beginning to avoid talking about important issues. As they distanced from each other emotionally and physically, John began to become anxious and, reverting to the old patterns of his abusive lifestyle, misread the situation.

He became jealous of the amount of time Sue began to spend with her friends. They had been invited to a barbecue with friends but Mike stubbornly refused to go so Sue went by herself John spent the time alone, trying to make sense of what was going on for him. He wrote a letter to Sue explaining his understanding of the situation. Sue returned late and Mike insisted on talking about their relationship. Sue was reluctant given how late it was. The more John tried to make Sue listen, the worse the situation became.

Mike became abusive and threatening; he began to wield two ornamental swords displayed over the mantelpiece. Sue managed to escape and call the police. Mike was arrested for threatening to kill — a serious charge.

The question you may be asking at this point is: 'How can someone who has made such good changes relapse back into old patterns of abusiveness?'

Unfortunately it is easy, particularly when the change is quite new. New behaviour, like a young baby, is fragile and needs nurturing and nourishment to become strong. If not supported, maintained, encouraged and challenged, then the new behaviour may not stand up against behaviour based on the Old Rule Book. This means attitudes, a return to self-righteous anger and abusive behaviour

In John's situation, the signs for a return to his old patterns of abusiveness were present — the not talking and distancing that was happening in his relationship, John's reluctance to compromise regarding Sue's needs, and his sitting at home brooding about her being out. All these added up to a dangerous situation.

One of the most significant factors in this story is that, on reflection, John could clearly see where he went wrong. Somehow he became blind to this when he was in the middle of it. His old pattern of wanting to maintain power and control in his relationship with Sue re-emerged. John also recognised that he didn't have any friends to whom he could talk about his confusions. One of his strong blueprints had been that 'men work things out for themselves'.

Questions to Ponder

- How will I be aware of the signs that I am returning to an abusive lifestyle, even in a little way?
- Am I likely to use these signs as a warning and act on them or will I ignore them and hope they go away?
- How will others be affected if I decide to return to an abusive lifestyle?
- What will a return to old patterns say about my resolve or determination to stick with a new lifestyle?

- Am I likely to resist the temptation to return to the old familiar (and abusive) patterns of behaviour or am I likely to give in if it gets too hard? When the going gets tough do the tough keep going forwards or do they go backwards?
- Do I know I have the courage and commitment to stand up against all of the messages that say it is okay for men to be abusive or do I think I lack the courage and commitment?

Safety Plans

I am a firm believer in having a clear safety plan in place so that when (or if) it is needed you can act decisively to ensure safety is retained. The following questions will help you to put together your safety plan.

1. What signs will tell me the old patterns of behaviour are coming back? Some men tell me that all of that is in the past. I caution you that while you may be feeling very positive at this point in time, a return to the old story is never far away.

2. Do I have a clear understanding of my cycle of abuse?

Yes

No

If you find yourself answering no to this question return to Chapter 2 and look again at that material. Even if you are clear, I encourage you to revisit parts of this book for some time. If you are like me, it often takes a while to fully grasp the meaning and significance of things you read. Each time I reread material I get more information.

3. What beliefs and attitudes from the Old Rule Book are most likely to invite me to return to the old story and abusive lifestyle?

4. What information from the impact of my abuse on others will I use to keep me safe to be around and able to respond to others in ways that encourage their trust and respect?

5. What is my time out strategy?

a. Where will I go?

b. Who will I talk to?

c. What route have I planned to take?

d. What do I need to take with me?

e. How long will I be away?

f. How will others know I am safe to come back?

g. What will I do when I come back?

h. How will I retain the respect and trust of those affected by my behaviour?

i. Whom have I shared this safety plan with?

Building Support for Changes

Earlier in this book I asked you to find a man and a woman who would support you through your process of change. How has enlisting the aid of a support team helped you along the way?

Often when I ask men who they talk to about personal things, they say their wives or partners. I then ask them who else they talk to and I get a blank stare.

I realised early in my work that men are often quite isolated from others, particularly other men. This is not to say that we don't spend time with other men — in fact, we often spend a great deal of time in male company. But when it comes to talking about feelings, worries and problems, men often approach women.

This can sometimes create further difficulties, particularly if there have been problems in the relationship and a degree of fear and mistrust exists. How is it possible to listen to and support someone who you may not respect?

In programmes that I run I do an exercise where, on a piece of paper, men write down the people they turn to for support when they need help. There are different types of support and men will turn to different people for what they have to offer.

If you need physical support for moving furniture, helping to concrete a driveway or paint the house, you may turn to different people from those you would contact if your partner has just left, if you have been made redundant, or if the children are causing havoc. The following list gives an idea of the different types of support we need to live a healthy life.

Companionship.

Being able to be heard and accepted.

The knowledge that others are struggling with similar issues.

Caring acceptance.

Intimacy and closeness with others.

Emotional support for hearing your pain and disappointments.

Direction on which way to turn next.

A sense of belonging and connection with others.

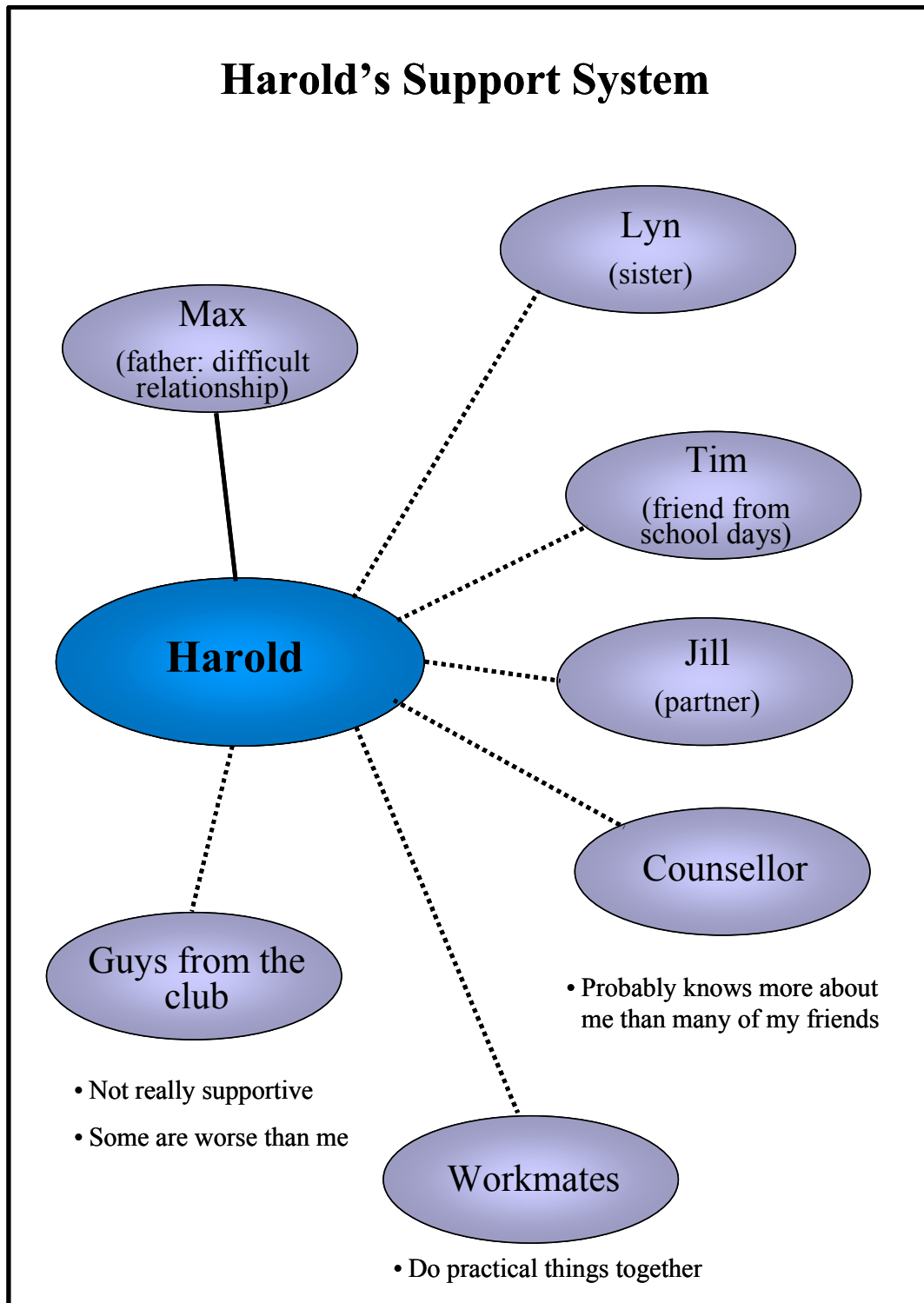
Shared interests with others.

A sounding board for problems, dilemmas and life changes.

Physical support in the form of practical assistance.


You can gain support from a wide range of people, including family members, friends, workmates, clubs and sports teams, and even professional helpers. Sometimes men discover that the support they currently have exists only if they act in certain ways.

When men embrace a non-abusive lifestyle, some friends and family members may feel threatened and drop away. They may not be ready to take on the challenge as you have, or may want to remain members of the Abuse Club. By pioneering a different way, you will threaten both them and their behaviour towards others. On the other hand, you will also provide a model for them to follow. You may be pleasantly surprised at the support and friendships offered.



Look at what Harold put down for his support system as it was before he began the process of change, and the gaps he identified (page 140). He then worked on filling in the gaps.

Exercise

-  Take a piece of paper and write down your support system with the types of support you get from others. Take a different-coloured pen and identify what the gaps in your support system are and who might fill these gaps for you. What plan do you have to build your support team to include the areas that are missing?

What you may find is that those you thought were supportive are only supportive if you act in certain ways. Harold found this out. His friends ridiculed him for going to a group for men who identified they had problems with violence.

They saw only the public side of Harold, unaware of how he acted in private. They gave him a hard time about becoming a wimp — I have always thought it strange that men see being abusive to women and children as somehow manly. What do you think?

Harold found it difficult to turn his back on friends who firmly held on to the old blueprint for men and women. He described himself at one point as being on a swing bridge halfway over a deep ravine, looking back at his friends who were too scared to follow and looking forward at the uncharted territory on the other side. Harold had to decide yet again if he was pioneer material, prepared to take the risks of crossing the ravine, or whether he would return to the familiar and relative safety of the old ways. A return to the old ways meant choosing the likelihood of having to leave his family, living with the shame of being abusive to his wife and children, and knowing that he was not strong enough to shake off his past tradition of abusiveness.

Harold chose to keep walking with the aid of encouragement from the side of the ravine opposite his old friends. In fact, he found several men who had already journeyed in the same direction, struggled with the same dilemmas, and were feeling positive about standing up against abusiveness. His fears were short-lived.

Questions to Ponder

- Being different could set me apart from many men. How will I cope with this?
- If I reject the blueprint of men as abusive I may find it difficult next time I hear or see another man being abusive to his partner How do I think I will cope with this situation? What will be the consequences for my relationship with him? Will others respect me more, or less, for making a stand against abusive behaviour?
- What will I say to my friends if they are not supportive of the changes I have been making? Some men are scared of making changes to abusive patterns of behaviour and find the easiest option is to put down those who have taken on the challenge of being non-abusive. Remember, these men are at Level 0 on our Building Blocks of Change diagram (Chapter 1, page 4).
- As my new ideas of what it means to be a man replace the old, redundant macho ideas, I may find my friends changing. How will I cope with having to form a new circle of friends?

Challenging Systems and Structures that Encourage Abusive Lifestyles

Men who have taken on the challenge of pioneering a non-abusive lifestyle find that society is littered with reinforcements of the old blueprint. They are everywhere — in magazines, on television, on the radio, in families, amongst our friends, and so on. This is disturbing, as you begin to realise how restrictive these blueprints are at a personal level, in relationships with others, and in society.

Our society encourages men to act out self-righteous anger and not look at the real story that it masks. Some men become a little overwhelmed by how pervasive these messages are. Others gain a real sense of clarity about where to go next.

Mark played first division rugby and had a promising future in the game ahead of him. He had assaulted his girlfriend, who left and decided she did not want to continue a relationship with him. Mark talked about how his father had been violent in his family of origin, and how the attitudes of abuse were reinforced in his rugby team. The locker room talk was demeaning to women, and physical force and violence were seen as one of the virtues of a good player.

Mark came to one group session and announced that he had made one of the most difficult decisions of his life.

Intrigued, we wanted to know more. He talked at length about deciding to turn his back on his rugby career because it was at odds with his new awareness of himself and the type of lifestyle he saw himself leading. He talked about how hard it had been for his girlfriend to fit into the male-dominated rugby scene. Rugby came first; she came second.

Mark had to ponder many of the questions similar to the ones above because of how central rugby had been to his life. It takes a brave man to turn his back on such an important aspect of his identity. However, Mark recognised that the combination of his upbringing and the reinforcement of the old male blueprint would see him living a life fraught with turmoil and disappointments.

Interestingly enough, Mark's father came to our next programme, having just been left by his wife of 35 years. Father and son formed a closer relationship, and were able to support each other in the challenge to be different.

There are two levels of change that I see as important. The first is letting people around you know that you have changed, and that you are now a different (and safer) person to be around. This is a test for all who have embarked on this particular pathway, as we are constantly challenged by our own past, those around us and the messages from the Old Rule Book to keep acting in abusive ways. There are some immediate things that you can do to maintain your safety and begin to help filter the message, as you will see below.

The second is encouraging others to adopt a non-abusive lifestyle. Some men find that in the short term it is enough to concentrate on keeping themselves abuse-free and healing the effects of their behaviour on others. As time goes by and their confidence develops, the opportunities to encourage change in others will increase.

Things to Do to Let Others Know You are Different

- *Act respectfully towards others.* Words and promises to not be abusive are not enough. The knowledge and skills that you have acquired will provide the basis of your new story, a story based on respect and equality.
- *Provide a different model for your children.* Talk to them about the Old Rule Book and blueprint men learn about being male in this society. Talk to them about the costs to others of relationships based on abusive and controlling behaviour. Encourage them to talk through issues and express feelings at a deeper level, and spend time taking your part in responding to the social and emotional needs of your family. This will also mean taking more responsibility around the house, being more involved with your children and in keeping family relationships alive.
- *Share with others the models in this book* about how to resolve issues in ways that encourage respect, trust and honesty. Lots of these tools can be used in family settings. I have known all members of families to bring along their ‘What’s Going On?’ chart to family meetings. This has helped to allow space for everyone to have their view of the situation acknowledged and responded to.
- *Join a men’s group or form your own* so that you can have a place to talk about the issues that you are facing in your life. This will help to overcome the fear of getting close to men, and free your partner from being the sole support for your issues.
- *Allow your partner the freedom to seek out his/her own support.* Allow them the time and energy to carry out their own healing and growth, without feeling afraid of your reaction or judgement. Some men fear that by allowing others the freedom to take charge of their own lives, they will somehow be left out. Non-abusive and supportive men have found that the opposite occurs. Their relationships become stronger and richer as a result, because of the stimulation that new ideas bring.

Things to Do to Create a Wider Environment for Non-Abuse

- *Support other men who are in change* by acting as their support team in the same way that others did for you as part of your journey.

I remember Ted (23), who was afraid of asking his boss for time off to come to one of my groups. We talked about how he would talk to his boss, and I offered to answer questions his boss might have about the value of Ted attending the group. Ted came back with this to report:

‘I went to Frank [his boss] and asked for time off on Saturday to come to the group. I told him my reasons for wanting to go. Frank looked at me for a while, then broke out into a big grin. You know what he told me? He had just been through a group and found it really helpful. And guess what? He offered to support me going through the group, said to talk to him if I was having a hard time of it. It’s amazing that other guys have got the same problem as me. Sometimes I think I’m the only one.’

- *Challenge other men who are acting in abusive and disrespectful ways.* You will be amazed how powerful it can be for another man to call someone on their violence. Don’t do this in an aggressive way but tell the person how abuse has affected your life, your relationships and respect for yourself. You may offer to assist that person in

finding the right kind of help they need to sort out their abusive behaviour. You may want to show them a copy of this book.

- *Be aware of disrespectful images* on television, sexist advertising and material that demeans women. Once you are aware of this material you can then talk through with others how it affects you and them. Decide not to support products and stores that use sex to sell their goods. One wonders if what they are selling is really that good if the products can't stand on their own merits.
- *Challenge anything that you see as supporting and encouraging abusive lifestyles.* Talk with other men and women about how you might do this. Writing letters, approaching people and talkback radio are good mediums for the expression of these ideas.

One man went into a dairy with his son to buy milk. In front of the counter were 'Playboy', 'Penthouse' and other pornographic material, placed at a level where his young son could see. The man calmly told the shopkeeper of his concerns about the material, how it demeaned and gave a very narrow view of how women should be. He also talked with the shopkeeper about his concerns about his children being exposed to such material and wondered what the shopkeeper could do about it. The shopkeeper said he hadn't thought about it and said he would shift the magazines, which he did.

- *Support activities that provide more realistic role models for children.* Avoid activities that encourage abusive patterns of behaviour developing. Look for activities where children can explore compromise, negotiation and winning in a healthy way, not at the expense of others.

Living a non-abusive lifestyle encompasses a wide variety of tasks. In addition to changing yourself, there is the challenge of encouraging others to change. As a true friend to other men, you may wish to challenge behaviour that you see or hear other men doing.

I remember sitting at home one Saturday night and hearing screaming, banging and crashing from a house down the road. My partner and I went down and knocked on the door to enquire if everything was all right. The man was stunned at my appearance in the doorway. I asked to speak to the woman involved to see if she was safe. There appeared to be no visible bruising. Another woman was also present and I asked her what was going on. I tried to engage the man in discussion but he was reluctant. I wanted to tell him what the impact had been on my partner and myself.

Feeling satisfied that the woman was safe and that she had a friend there to support her, we left. My heart was beating very fast indeed, as it took all my courage to do what I had just done. My partner and I agreed that if we heard further abuse we would call the police.

Ongoing Struggles

In this book you have been on a journey that has taken you behind the obvious and dominant story of men's anger. You have explored what is behind this dominant story, a tale that is more about an abusive lifestyle than about anger. You have struggled to understand how looking only at anger censors out the stories of those on the receiving end of your behaviour

You have joined many thousands of men who have taken on the challenge to go behind the obvious and take a hard, critical look at what it means to be a man.

This takes courage and commitment, the hallmark of real men. By taking on this challenge you have said that you no longer want to be chained to a masculinity that is based on being abusive towards others. You can at long last reclaim your pride and stand tall as a man who knows himself and acts respectfully towards others.

You have now reached the end of what I have to offer you. Change is an ongoing process that requires constant vigilance and effort if the changes made are to become permanent. The changes that you have made are radical in that you have stood up against a long tradition of how 'men are supposed to be'.

Some men I have worked with have this idea that they can change, then forget about it and sail on through life. Remember the opening quote to this book about the bully? The bully's sense of who he is, is based on control. It takes a long time to confront the bully in ourselves and overcome a lifetime of learning. I know for myself that every day I am challenged for being a different kind of man, having to resist the old ideas, and I keep reminding myself of the importance of relationships based on respect and equality.

This is a challenge that I take on gladly because I do not want to go through life hurting others and being hurt. You may be the same. Pioneering new relationships with others, be they partners, children, friends or other men and women, is probably the most exciting and fulfilling aspect of living. Being understood and understanding others is the essence of being human fully. I have made the decision that I want to be fully human, not half-human, and I invite you to join me in that view.

At times I need to revisit the old patterns (not by relapsing but to look back at them) to remind myself of the distance I have travelled on the non-abusive pathway. I enjoy being able to look back and see a different me. I know that others also enjoy this different me. My partner, friends and those I meet in the course of my work and social life can relate in a more full way. I know, as you know, that this way is much more fulfilling and satisfying. It is important that all of us keep sight of the type and future that we want with others, both for ourselves, partners, children and friends. Congratulations on taking up this challenge. You will now discover what it means to be a man in the true sense of the word.

And what of the impact on others? Below are the stories of three women who have lived with men who lived by the Old Rule Book prior to taking on the challenge to change. These women reported significant and profound changes to their relationships, and were able to stop feeling responsible for their partners. They were interviewed six months after their partners had attended a programme.

Judith (50) had been in a violent relationship for 30 years. She said that during and after the time Doug (55) attended a programme to look at his abusive behaviour was the longest period of not being frightened she had experienced in that 30 years. Doug had agreed to do the programme because she had left him and refused to return until he made positive changes. He knew that she was serious but was unprepared for the mutual benefits that the programme provided.

Doug found that he related better to friends and family, and was delighted when positive comments were made about the improvements. A friend said to him that it was never previously possible to talk so easily to him. He also found he was more tolerant with his one-year-old grandson, and enjoyed being with the child far more

than before. Judith's sadness was that these changes hadn't happened years before. She had to grieve for 30 years of lost time.

Margaret (35), whose partner had previously exercised complete control over financial matters, discussed the effect this had on her with her partner. She said that Tony (40) had been unaware of the negative effects; they were now able to discuss the problem and make profound changes that gave her more responsibility and equality. She reported that Tony's whole attitude in general had changed, and it was easier to discuss her feelings and resolve problems. Their relationship became closer and more fulfilling.

Kath (44) told me that Bob (48) had been depressed and lacking in motivation since his redundancy. Kath and her daughter Melissa (12) were on the receiving end of Bob's abuse. He was critical of other family members, moody and withdrawn. If he felt bad, they had to feel bad. Kath said that after attending a programme, Bob's motivation improved, and he gained full-time employment within a few weeks.

Another positive development was that Bob had contacted a counsellor and arranged therapy sessions in which he and his stepdaughter discussed their feelings about each other and resolved some differences. Kath was relieved that Bob had taken responsibility for such an initiative. She felt he wouldn't have done that before going through the change process.

These three stories talk of the changes that are possible when men put themselves in the driver's seat of the change process. All three women now find themselves able to be heard in their relationships, and taken seriously. They have a place to stand with their partners, not having been relegated to the back seat of the relationship.

The last word must come from one of the men in a group I ran recently.

'I'm different. I've been told that by people that are close to me. I recognise things a lot better; I listen a lot better. Sometimes I'd drift away when people talked to me; I know I'm not doing that. I'm not as loud as I used to be and feel more relaxed. I accept the fact of what's happening, just keep myself calm, and use the tools I learnt to sort out what's going on for me.

Instead of saying to the kids, 'Put your bike away' in a loud voice, I'll ask them and if they don't I'll explain why I wanted it done. They respond much better. I wanted to break that cycle so my kids aren't afraid of me. And you know I can say now that they aren't. They tell me all sorts of things. Things I wouldn't have had the guts to tell my parents for fear of getting a hiding.' (Steve, 32).

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