

CHAPTER FIVE: AN ISSUE OF CHOICE

I was pretty scared fronting up to the first interview. I wanted to do something about my violence ... I didn't want to be someone who didn't care about it ... about the fact that I was violent. I wanted to make a positive step towards doing something about it.

(Richard, aged 33)

Let's recap where you have got to in your journey towards embracing a non-abusive lifestyle. In reaching this point you will have done some real soul-searching and will have a much clearer understanding of yourself, what your abusive patterns of behaviour are and what supports and encourages them. You will be clearer about how much of your struggle is to do with family patterns and how much is to do with the blueprint of what it means to be a man in the traditional sense. You will be aware of how easy it is to shift the responsibility for your actions onto others.

The next part of the journey is to decide on what you do with this information. Are you ready to embark on the next leg of the journey or do you want to rest up for a while?

'We now move on to Level 4 — with the information you have, you are now able to make a decision. Do you carry on with behaviours that have been a part of your past (stay the same), or do you pioneer and explore new behaviours that treat others with the respect they deserve? I have always believed that until men put themselves in the driver's seat of their change process then real change will not occur. The decision of where to go from here rests with you and you alone.

You are now at a critical time of decision-making. All of what you have done to this point is preparation for the next part, which is about putting into action the commitment you will make to a non-abusive lifestyle. As you have become more aware of your abusive behaviour, the impact of that behaviour on others, and where those unhelpful patterns of behaviour come from, you may have found some things have already changed. It takes courage, strength and determination to take responsibility for your story of self-intoxicating anger.

Some men find the struggle to overcome the Old Rule Book just too hard and continue on with a lifestyle of abuse. What these men continue to do is invite others to be responsible for their behaviour and live with the often serious consequences of that decision.

Getting this far in the journey, however, sets you apart from those men. Your preparedness to even begin to consider facing up to your behaviour says to me that deep down you know, as I know, that there is a better way. 'While this may be the hardest work you have ever done on yourself, I have worked with hundreds of men who can attest to the benefits. You, however, will have to see these benefits for yourself. To be responsible in our lives means shouldering our own burdens and being prepared to stand up against the injustices of abusive behaviour.

You make decisions and choices all the time; millions of them each day without even realising it. Some decisions are so familiar that you don't even notice them. They remain decisions, which means you can change them.


Questions to Ponder

- Do I feel more or less comfortable now that the issue of my abuse is out in the open?
- Do I have more or less understanding about how it is for others around me?
- How do I treat others now?
- Do I think others feel I am treating them with more respect?
- What have others said or done now that I have started to look at my part of the story?
- Now that I have begun to face up to my story do I think others respect me more, or less?
- What would have happened if I hadn't looked at the issue?
- Where would my relationship with my partner, children and friends be in two years' time if I had decided to persist with an abusive lifestyle?

Costs and Benefits of Change

You are now at a critical stage in the journey of change; a time to make the decision of whether to move on or to stay with the old patterns. As a way of deciding which pathway you want to go down, it is useful to compare the costs and benefits of continuing with a lifestyle based on the Old Rule Book with the costs and benefits of joining other men in writing a New Rule Book.

Exercise

-  On the next page write down all of the things that you see as the benefits and costs of a lifestyle based around abuse and a lifestyle based around non-abuse.

What you may find is that there are short-term benefits in adhering to the Old Rule Book, but that the long-term costs don't make it worthwhile. Compare your list with the list on page 4 generated from men in one of my programmes.

Saying Goodbye to the Old Rule Book

When you change aspects of your life you often outgrow other people, especially if they continue to support the old you. Abusive patterns of behaviour and self-righteous anger are in many ways like old friends, ready to be there when you find yourself with uncomfortable feelings. You may feel in a bind over wanting, on the one hand, to be rid of patterns of behaviour that cause you trouble and, on the other, feeling afraid to let go of the familiar. It is natural for all of your old fears to re-emerge when you take on the task of pioneering new

ground. In the end you will make your decision and live with the consequences of that decision.

Benefits of an abusive lifestyle	Costs of an abusive lifestyle
Benefits of an non-abusive lifestyle	Costs of an non-abusive lifestyle

Benefits of an abusive lifestyle	Costs of an abusive lifestyle
I have power and control. I win.	People are afraid of me. People avoid me.

<p>I can blame others. I have no friends. I don't have to face my fears. I'm staunch.</p>	<p>I've mucked up three marriages. I don't like myself. I feel guilty much of the time. It hurts to see my children afraid of me. I'm not respected. My family have disowned me.</p>
Benefits of a non-abusive lifestyle	Costs of a non-abusive lifestyle
<p>People will like me I'll be trusted The tension will not be as high. My children won't be scared. I will be able to be honest. I can claim my self-respect. I'll like myself. I will understand myself better. I'll break the family tradition of abuse. My kids won't grow up and become like me. More intimacy in my relationship. More sex. More fun with others.</p>	<p>I'll have to work harder to maintain relationships. I will have to keep trying. I won't always win.</p>

Questions to Ponder

- Am I ready to say goodbye to the Old Rule Book or do I want to hold on tightly to it?
- If I decided to hold on to the Old Rule Book, or parts of it, what would this mean to people around me?
- How would I live with the knowledge that I came close to breaking with an unhealthy tradition and then backed off?
- If I have decided to move on and develop a New Rule Book for myself, what will I use to deal with the invitations to return to the old ways?

What is your decision? Will you move on to Level 5 and develop the skills for respectful, trustful and equal relationships? Or will you move back to Level 0 and ignore your and others' stories about what is going on, putting the responsibility for your actions onto others?

Once the decision has been made to accept the challenge of change, you will move into the action stage of the change process. This is the stage when specific skills are acquired and a real sense of progress becomes obvious. As more of a sense of self-control becomes evident, self-esteem increases as you learn new and healthy ways to deal with issues. It is at this stage that partners, children and friends often notice the changes you have made. This can often be a difficult time of adjustment as others may be mistrustful of how long the changes will last and whether or not the old patterns will re-emerge. Congratulations if you have decided to move on. Many men just can't find the courage or strength to keep going. I advise these men or their partners to consider separation proceedings, because I know what will happen if abuse continues to raise its head in family life. You also may have been tempted to give up. The fact that you didn't stands as a statement about your commitment and determination to embrace a non-abusive lifestyle.

Questions to Ponder

- Am I ready to accept responsibility for my part in this situation or will I continue relying on others to shoulder this burden?
- Who will support me in this new lifestyle?
- Now that I am prepared to make the decision to change, what does this say about me as a man?

Let's see how John dealt with this stage of working towards a decision to embrace a non-abusive lifestyle.

'My first gut reaction was that it's going to be like it had been when I went with my first wife through group therapy. At that stage what they did was put somebody on a stool in the middle and grill shit out of them. I was really apprehensive on the first Saturday — as I say I'd figured there was nothing wrong with me and what the hell was I doing here?'

Having been assessed as being appropriate to join a group, John was asked to go away and decide if he was ready for the changes he would have to make if he was to overcome his problem with self-righteous anger and violence. He had been given the very clear message that he had a problem, and that the decision to do something about it was his. The group process, and how it differed from the process of his previous experience, was talked about.

At this stage John was still at Level 2, shifting responsibility for his behaviour onto his partner. He did, however, agree to attend a series of group sessions. John's perception of his situation was being challenged by new information, and he was being challenged to respond.

'I had envisaged mass murderers and rapists, and all sorts of really, really violent people, but most of them were exactly the same as me. Within the first session it took me about two hours to work out that I really did have a major problem because it wasn't just me thinking I didn't have a problem; there were fifteen other guys there, sitting there thinking exactly the same thing as me, you know, well there's nothing wrong with me, it's my partner that's got the problem ... within a couple of hours I knew I had the problem and realised that we all knew deep down that, if we were to get anything from the group, then we would have to drop the bullshit and stop protecting ourselves.'

It took John another few sessions to realise what was different:

'Within a couple of hours I knew I had a problem but it took me another three or four sessions before I realised that I could actually do something positive about it ... but it wasn't until being there, maybe three, four or five times, that I realised that I had actually changed ... it's been a marvellous thing for me, it really has.'

The exciting news is that John is running programmes in Australia now and sharing his experience with other men.

Questions to Ponder

- What will I need to give up if I embark on a non-violent and non-abusive lifestyle?
- Will I be respected more or less if I stand up against abuse and the old male blueprint?
- Am I ready to break with the old traditions that place men in a dominant position and work towards equal partnerships with others, or do I want to retain the benefits of men's privileged position and being on top?
- Am I ready to stand up and say no to an abusive lifestyle, or do I want to keep some abuse up my sleeve for when I might need it?

Summary

In this chapter you have explored the process of making a decision to either go on with the change or return to your former lifestyle. Some men move quickly into change while others need time to weigh up the costs and benefits of giving up the Old Rule Book before moving on. I am a firm believer in men having as much information as possible so that they can make an informed decision and very clearly know the consequences. At the end of the day we have to live with ourselves and those around us. I have been consistently impressed by how seriously men take this decision-making process. I know that every one of them wants to have good relationships with partners, children, friends and workmates. The first part of this book has given you the opportunity to gain a great deal of insight into yourself and the impact your behaviour has on others. We have also reached an understanding of the supports that exist for a disrespectful lifestyle. The rest of this book looks at putting the ideas for a non-abusive lifestyle into practice so that you can feel good about how you react with others, and so that others can feel good about being with you.