

I didn't realise I was an abusive husband

With one in three women now victims of domestic abuse, this week marks the start of a new UN campaign to tackle this growing epidemic – which peaks around Christmas. Here, in a candid interview, James*, 37, reveals that while he never physically attacked his wife, he still sought help for his emotional abuse...

'It began in the same way as usual, with a row over something trivial. We were going on holiday, but my wife and two young daughters weren't ready. As I waited by the door while they rushed around, I felt my anger rise until something snapped inside me. I stormed upstairs, screaming that they were useless, in the same way I'd done countless times before. But, halfway up, I saw my youngest daughter realise she couldn't outrun me, drop to the floor and curl up in a ball, her whole body shaking.'

'Stopping in my tracks, overwhelmed by the fact that she was clearly terrified of me, I finally realised what my wife and children had known for years, but had been too frightened to tell anyone. Although I'd never hit them, they were victims of domestic abuse – and I was the abuser.'

'This week marks the start of the UN's 16 Days of Action campaign, which runs from 25 November to 10 December. One in three women are attacked in their lifetime – be it physically or, like my wife, mentally – and, according to police, cases of domestic abuse can increase by up to 20 per cent over Christmas thanks to the stress of the festive period.'

'I know it's unusual to hear from the abuser – so many of us are in denial about our actions – but I'm speaking out in the hope that others might realise what they're doing and stop, before it's too late.'

'I grew up with a domineering father who often hit me, my mother and sister. As the only boy, I tried to protect them from the worst of his rages and vowed I'd never be like him. Yet the older I got, the ▶

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more my temper developed. I didn't see it as a problem – it flared up occasionally with my wife, just like it had sometimes with previous girlfriends. Neither of us enjoyed rowing, but I accepted these occasional blow-ups as a normal part of any relationship.

'Yet when the recession hit, I started feeling huge pressure at the software company I own. I was working crazy hours and not getting much sleep. I don't want to make excuses for my behaviour, but the stress definitely affected my ability to stay in control.

'I started to find myself getting annoyed by inconsequential incidents when I got home at night: one of the children being noisy or my wife nagging me to wash up. My response would be totally disproportionate. My head would fill with blood and I'd explode, screaming until the rage dissipated. I was stunned at the level of anger I was capable of feeling but, even though I instantly felt guilty, I didn't stop.

'From then on, rather than the occasional row, I would scream at my wife or children most nights. It was like releasing a pressure valve and venting all my frustrations from the day. At the time, when I was losing my temper, I'd feel perfectly justified in my reaction. Yet the moment I calmed down, I would be filled with remorse and would apologise to my wife. Although I didn't see it then, she had stopped arguing back a long time ago. She's told me since that she'd just freeze and wait for my rage to pass. She genuinely didn't know whether I was going to hit her or the children, which is absolutely devastating for me. A powerful woman at work – she's a project manager – she'd come home and tiptoe around me. Even her leaving a cup by the sink would be enough for me to turn on her, calling her "f***ing useless".

'Living with someone that volatile creates an atmosphere of constant fear. Gradually the children became so scared they avoided me, no longer offering me hugs. This only fuelled my temper further as I felt rejected. My wife was incredibly brave and found the courage to tell me several times that my explosive anger was becoming tantamount to abuse. She made it clear that unless I changed, she'd be forced to take the children and leave me. Yet even though, deep down, I knew my behaviour was spiralling, I refused to accept what she was saying. In my mind I didn't fit the "stereotype" of an abuser – I'm well-educated and professionally successful.

'Until, that is, the time four years ago, when my daughter was cowering in front of me. It was a moment of heart-breaking clarity. I'd finally turned into my father – the one thing I'd promised myself I'd never be. I could remember vividly the terror I'd felt around him, and it was realising I'd made my children feel the same that told me I had to change.

'My wife had already contacted Relate to ask for advice and they told her about the Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP). After assessing me with a series of highly detailed questions to discover the extent of the risk I posed to my family, they asked me to join their 32-week course. For my wife, it was the first step to proving I was serious about changing.

'At my first meeting in DVIP's offices in London's Waterloo, I looked around the room at the other men and wondered what I was doing there. Most of them had been referred by the courts or social services, and most had subjected their partners and children to violence. I was ashamed to be associated with what they'd done, positive I wasn't as bad as them. But when I heard them talking about the fear their wives and girlfriends had expressed, and the problems they had communicating with them, I realised that we were all the same – and all, in our own ways, abusive.

'Using a lot of role-playing of ordinary domestic situations – rows over household chores, the kids playing up – we learned to recognise when our behaviour was becoming aggressive. It sounds strange, but many of us didn't even realise some of the things we were saying – constant belittling or telling someone they were stupid – fell into that category.

'To people who are used to trying to communicate without aggression, it sounds simple, but for men like me, it's not. Controlling your anger takes a lot of practice. My wife was very patient and supportive, encouraging me to open up to her and tell her my feelings on a daily basis, so I wasn't storing up my frustration until I hit boiling point.

'At first, I found it very difficult and slipped back into my old ways a few times, reaching instantly for a put-down when my wife said something I disagreed with. Gradually, though, I learned to spot the signs I was losing my temper and take a deep breath.

'I'm incredibly lucky my wife didn't walk away, and for that I'll always be grateful. We get on much better now and she's reassured that, thanks to DVIP, I am able to control my behaviour. My children are also much more tactile and will row with me, whereas before they would never have dared.

'My greatest wish is to give them a stable, happy family background. When I look back and see how close I came to destroying that, I feel desperately ashamed. I want them to have a loving relationship with me that helps them grow into confident adults – the opposite of what I had with my dad. I just hope more men in my position realise there's help out there if they want to change. It's not easy, but it is possible.' ■

For information about Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes, visit respect.uk.net/pages/domestic-violence-perpetrator-programmes-uk.html