

THE ANGER GAMES

Put-downs, emotional control and cutting you off from your friends. This is the new face of domestic violence, says **Sally Beck**

Savannah* was 26 when she started dating Ben, a charismatic creative director she met at work in London. Sixteen years her senior, he out-charmed Prince Charming. He bought her expensive jewellery and took her on fairytale five-star trips to Rome and Lake Como. She had no clue that he was hiding a Jekyll and Hyde personality. "Gradually, he started commenting on my clothes, hair and make-up, then he started shopping for me and dressing me. He called all my outfits boring and unsexy, which embarrassed me." But soon it wasn't just her wardrobe he was controlling. "Once we moved in together, he became very possessive. He'd turn down invitations so I felt cut off from my friends and family, and if I did go out without him, he'd bombard me with at least 30 phone calls and texts, and I'd be grilled when I got home." It took Savannah, now 32, four years to leave him. "I'd become reliant on him for my confidence, but the relationship was tearing me up – I spent more and more time crying, trying to work out how to keep him happy," she says.

What Savannah had experienced was domestic abuse. Emotional abuse had crept up on her. But if

she was your friend – the life and soul of the party who suddenly lost her spark and seemed to spend *all* her time with her partner – would you recognise it? A YouGov study of more than 500 women showed that 95% of respondents identified physical abuse as domestic violence, but less than half understood more subtle controlling techniques, such as mocking you in front of others, telling you what to wear, or being jealous or possessive.

ONE IN FOUR WOMEN
have been
in an abusive
relationship

"One Christmas, he gave me a size 10 dress even though I was a size 14," says Phoebe, 28, who met her former boyfriend, William, when she was 22. "It made me feel really bad about myself. Whenever I was out, he'd find ways to let me know he was watching me, like leaving notes on my car or lifting up one of the windscreen wipers. Once, I was in a club with my girlfriends and I spotted him alone, on the other side." Though no blows were thrown, Phoebe was being battered with toxic mind games. "He was always telling me that I'd never find anyone else, that he was the only person who would ever love me," she says. Which is why the government's change to the definition of domestic violence this month is so vital. It will now include emotional, ▶



Battered with toxic mind games

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He didn't have to hit me, I was terrified of him and knew I had to leave

Emotional control

JEALOUS AND POSSESSIVE

HE KEPT TELLING ME NO ONE ELSE WOULD EVER LOVE ME

They'll do anything to stop you leaving

The relationship was tearing me up inside

He bombarded me with phone calls and texts, and I'd be grilled when I got home

He started controlling my life gradually

YOU DON'T REALISE IT'S A DANGEROUS EMOTIONAL PROBLEM

He forced her to sleep facing him

HE PUSHED ME DOWN THE STAIRS, THEN SLAMMED THE DOOR AGAINST MY BUMP

Beaten and left unconscious at her mother's house

He had his hands around my throat

CUT OFF FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY

◀ controlling, coercive and threatening behaviour as well as violence – and encompass teenage victims as young as 16. Yes, 16. Government research has shown women aged between 16 and 19 are actually the most at risk, with 20-24 year olds only just behind.

Monitoring calls, hiding keys

Rachel, from Manchester, was just 18 when she met Tom and fell head over heels in love. "He was very romantic at first and told me he was going to look after me and that I'd never need anyone else," she says. "He started controlling my life gradually." Over the years, he began checking her phone bills to see who she'd been calling, monitoring the mileage on her car to make sure she never went anywhere without telling him, and even took her front door keys so she couldn't go out unless he was home. "I didn't realise it was abuse until he became more and more angry. When I was 34, he threatened to kill me if I left him and pinned me up against the wall, shouting in my face. He didn't have to hit me, I was terrified of him and knew I had to leave."

If last year's headlines taught us anything about domestic abuse, it is that anyone can be a victim and the most unexpected men can be perpetrators. What a complete shock when jovial Brit comedian Justin Lee Collins made the news for abusing his girlfriend, Anna Larke, 38. It emerged during the harassment trial, last October, that he was controlling in the extreme: Anna said he forced her to sleep facing him, made her quit social networking sites, and grilled her on her previous sexual encounters, noting

all the graphic details down in a notebook and testing her on her previous answers.

"Women often think it only happens to older married women with children, but there is no stereotype of a domestic violence victim," says Polly Neate, chief executive for domestic abuse charity Women's Aid. During a Twitter debate

about rapper Chris Brown's brutal assault of on-off girlfriend Rihanna, *Times* columnist Caitlin Moran and Radio 1 DJ Gemma Cairney both confessed to having experienced domestic abuse. "I was in a violent relationship aged 12-17..." Tweeted Gemma. Caitlin replied: "Same with me. You just think it's in the spectrum of normality at that age. You don't realise it's a dangerous emotional problem."

High-profile cases put the issue under a harsh spotlight and get everyone talking, but it's the tip of the iceberg. National statistics paint a dark picture: one in four women in the UK say they have been in an abusive relationship – while two a week are killed by their partners or ex-partners. Cassandra McDermott was one of them. In 2001, aged 19, she was beaten by her boyfriend, Mario Celaire, then 23, and left unconscious at her mother's house in south London. She died there after choking on her own vomit. In memory of her daughter, probation officer Jennifer McDermott set up the Cassandra Learning Centre to raise awareness and educate young people under 25. "Young people suffer more from emotional abuse than physical," she says. "In the

majority of cases I see, it's sex related. I counselled a young Pakistani girl who was having a secret relationship with a Bangladeshi boy. He threatened to tell her friends and family if she didn't provide certain sexual favours for him." And when things are ►

THE WARNING SIGNS

YOUR PARTNER...

- Is overly jealous or possessive
- Mocks you or calls you names; is verbally threatening
- Isolates you from friends and family
- Suffers severe mood changes, charming one minute, nasty the next
- Threatens or attempts suicide unless you comply with demands
- Humiliates you in front of others, checks your phone, accompanies you everywhere
- Threatens to hurt you or your loved ones; lies to your family and friends about you
- Forces you to have sex

WOMEN AREN'T THE ONLY VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE...

One man every three weeks is killed by a violent partner in the UK. A recent survey of over 100 people in Southwark, London, suggested that young men might even be more likely to accept aggressive behaviour than women. "Though they almost never report it because it's such a taboo," says domestic violence psychologist Dr David Holmes.

◀ aggressive? "Women often feel they can handle it. They say things like, 'If he hits me, I can hit back.' But men can hit twice as hard. Cassie was feisty but she couldn't protect herself against Mario."

Take back control

The good news is that the government says it's committed to addressing the problem, and does seem to be headed in the right direction. "We recently trialled Domestic Violence Protection Orders allowing police to ban abusers from contacting victims – forcing offenders to leave shared residences, instead of victims being forced to flee homes and seek refuge," says Jeremy Browne, Minister for Crime Prevention. Another pilot measure now in place is Clare's Law – named after Clare Wood, who was murdered by her ex-boyfriend in 2009 – which allows people to check if their partner has a history of violence.

But perhaps the most valuable weapon is learning the warning signs. "If your partner is trying to make you cut ties with the people close to you, it's a red flag," says leading domestic violence psychologist Dr David Holmes. "Most abusers will try to isolate you from friends and family. Look out for ways in which they are taking emotional control of you: dictating who you see, checking and taking your phone, controlling your money," he warns. "It's often somebody much older who misuses the trust of the younger person."

He identifies guys like Savannah's ex-boyfriend Ben as the worst types of abusers – seemingly charming and exciting with an arch manipulator lurking beneath. "A typical early sign with these types is that the relationship is progressing much, much faster than it should. It's almost too

“I didn't realise it was abuse until he became more and more angry”

perfect and too unbelievable. You hear things like, 'Let's go for tea in Paris.' If they don't get you on the hook soon enough, you're likely to be ditched and they'll find someone else to sweep off their feet. If you're already hooked, they'll do anything to stop you leaving, including threatening suicide."

According to Dr Holmes, marriage can be a catalyst for the next stage – physical abuse. "It's often used to nail you down. Once you're married, it's very hard to say you've made a terrible mistake." Eliza, 30, from Buckinghamshire, met her husband, Iain, when she was 24. Iain was an angry man, which made her uneasy, but she thought he would soften over time. He didn't, and became violent after they married. "The first incident came when I was pregnant," she says. "Iain pushed me down the stairs during an argument and later slammed the door against my bump." They went on to have two children and the first serious physical attack happened in front of them, when they were just three and one: "Iain had his hands round my throat and my oldest was shouting, 'Don't hurt Mummy!'" Eliza found support through Women's Aid and walked away, but many others are too scared to seek help at all.

Less than 24% of domestic violence is reported, and those who do report it have usually been assaulted as many as 35 times before calling the police. "People are worried about seeking help, but their experiences won't be trivialised or made light of if they contact Women's Aid or any domestic abuse organisation," says Neate. "After years of living in fear, it's incredible when you realise you can have a positive two-way relationship, which is not just about your partner," says Dr Holmes. "It's worth mustering all your strength to leave in the hope of finding that." ©

WHERE TO FIND HELP

WOMEN'S AID offers information and support, including a survivors' forum. National Domestic Violence 24hr Helpline: 0808 2000 247; womensaid.org.uk

CASSANDRA LEARNING CENTRE provides support for

victims under 25. Call 0808 2000 247; cassandralearningcentre.org.uk

REFUGE has a network of safe houses providing emergency accommodation for women and children. Helpline: 0808 2000 247; refuge.org.uk

RESPECT helps perpetrators to stop abuse. Freephone: 0808 802 4040; respectphoneline.org.uk

MANKIND INITIATIVE is a network for men being abused. National helpline: 01823 334244; mankind.org.uk