

A considerate officer took me aside and warned me that the domestic violence would continue if I remained in that toxic relationship with Angie. He asked if I had any place to go.

By that time I had scrounged up some savings and reluctantly planned to return home and live with my parents. So I called my father, who came with his truck to help me haul my few belongings back home. I simply packed up and left, leaving my whole life, my friends, and my apartment in the rear-view mirror.

Somehow, I graduated from college, but just barely. I was 22.

Moving back home was awful, but where else could I go? I didn't tell my well-meaning parents the whole story about the abuse, so they didn't fully comprehend my situation.

I heard: "You could have called earlier." "This is what you get." "I hope you're over this." Moving forward hasn't been easy.

There were times with Angie that were good. That's what sucks. But those good times don't outweigh everything else that was happening. You trick yourself into thinking that holding on to happier times is good enough.

You really never do get over the abuse, but you take your experiences and learn from them. You need time to grow after being a victim. Scars remain, but I realize now how lucky I was to survive the manipulative, abusive relationship I was wrapped up in.

Abuse is part of my story, but it's not the defining characteristic. I was able to grow and have a healthy relationship after my years of domestic violence.

Fifteen years later, I'm happily married. My wife and I are raising two rambunctious little girls, we have a nice house, and I'm in a happy relationship with my kids, career, and friends. By working together, my parents and I have learned and healed. I'm proud to say they have become great allies. It's taken a lot of hard work, but life is good.

I am a survivor ... literally. I lived. Still, I couldn't have survived without help.

You have to trust people around you who want you to be OK. Trying to find someone to trust will be the hardest thing you'll ever do. But you have to talk to someone, even if it's a stranger. Isolation is what's going to get you killed.

There are many perspectives to domestic violence. Some people believe that abuse in the LGBTQ community can't happen, that there is some kind of stigma about female abusers. No matter who you are, having sex you don't want to have is rape. That's abuse. That's very real.

We need to have more diverse conversations about domestic violence. No matter what gender we are, we have to recognize the signs of abuse. We must provide our young people with the information they need to develop self-pride and the confidence and courage they need to be themselves.

Anyone can be a victim of domestic violence. If you need help, reach out. We are all people who deserve good things.

***I am not just a survivor.
I am a thriver.***

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My Story



**I AM A SURVIVOR OF
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

You are not alone.
Read a survivor's story.

My life unraveled.

As a girl of 7, I already knew. I wasn't straight.

When I came out at 15 as a sophomore in high school, my parents sent me to a therapist.

It wasn't exactly conversion therapy, but my therapist's uninformed analysis would haunt me in years to come. People were gay due to sexual abuse, she said. All gay relationships were abusive, she said. I hadn't been sexually abused, but I knew who I was.

My parents are good people, but they didn't understand. I couldn't wait to get away, and I did. After graduation, I enrolled in an art school 800 miles from home. The city had a prominent, yet discreet, LGBTQ community, so I felt more comfortable. I rented an apartment with two guys and another girl, and took a job in a 24-hour deli to help pay the bills. I was on my own and making new friends. Life was looking up.

And then I met "Angie."

Angie was a local woman who managed the deli where I worked. She was charming and funny and made me feel special. Because she was 30 and I was 20, I felt so mature and lucky that this charismatic woman had chosen me! We dated and started a relationship.

I was young, in a new city, and in love. Looking back, I was so naïve. I didn't realize my struggles with a controlling, abusive partner, who nearly destroyed me, were just beginning.

I found out Angie had another girlfriend and put my foot down. It's me or her, I told her. Angie agreed to end her other relationship, and never let me forget it. "I left her for you," she said, a line she would use over and over again to get her way. That was the beginning of the manipulation.

Despite all the cheating and the age difference, Angie soon moved in with me and my roommates. It wasn't long before the physical abuse began, escalated by Angie's excessive drinking.

One night she came home drunk and wanted sex, but I refused. When I tried to leave the bedroom she grabbed my arm like she was going to break it. My roommates weren't around and I was screaming. I knew if I didn't give in she would hurt me. I always thought rape was when a woman was attacked by a man. I didn't want to use the word rape, but that's what it was.

I lost a lot of my fight that night. I knew Angie could hurt me and I had no one to talk to. I resigned myself to that abusive relationship. I thought back to what the therapist had told me about all gay relationships being related to sexual abuse. I believed it was coming true — all before my 21st birthday.

To keep the peace, I did what Angie asked me to do and talked myself into believing everything was all right. In reality the situation was getting worse. My roommates noticed and two of them moved out. After Angie learned I wouldn't fight back, strange things happened. My money went missing, my rent check bounced, my credit card got hacked, and weird purchases showed up on my monthly statements. I was too scared to ask Angie about it.

When a friend threw a party for my 21st birthday, I bought a cute sundress to wear. A jealous Angie accused me of dressing up to impress a coworker, so I changed into jeans and a T-shirt. Her attempt to isolate me was kicking in. Angie went with me to celebrate my birthday and met up with a "friend." It turned out she

had been cheating on me with this woman for months. I was crushed. Angie didn't come home that night.

She called a few nights later, and I took her back. The downward spiral continued. Angie drank nonstop, she couldn't hold a job, she wouldn't let me sleep for days on end, and took my car without asking. I had to change my phone number because a drug dealer was trying to track her down through me.

One incident was emotionally devastating. We were out together and she pushed me down the steps a basement bar. To be so callously abused in a public place nearly broke my spirit. She's going to kill me, I thought. I was going to die. But even fear and shame weren't enough for me to seek help. I went home because I didn't know what else to do. One more time, I gave in and took her back.

I was so depressed and embarrassed that I began hiding my wallet and car keys. I knew I was suffering from severe domestic violence, but I didn't know who to talk to or where to go. I was so sad, so stuck, so empty.

My grades were abysmal. It was now my senior year and I didn't think I would graduate. I began self-harming and internalizing all my problems. I blamed myself.

I attempted suicide. I didn't see any other way out. Somehow, I found the courage to call a friend for help. I might not be here today if not for him. Making a clean break from my abusive relationship was still in the distance, but I started to get more help and devised a plan. I didn't tell Angie I was planning to leave.

Around the time of my graduation Angie said she would go to rehab. I wanted to believe her, but didn't. For good reason. Instead of going to meetings, she was using my car to hook up with another woman.

The last time I saw Angie, she had gone to a friend's house, after draining my bank account and taking my wallet, keys and car. I confronted her and we had a huge fight. The neighbors called the police.