

Article: Domestic Abuse

By Townsville Family Lawyer, Emma Donald

23 April 2021

I read Jess Hill's book '**See What You Made Me Do**' some time ago. It is the most excellent book for anyone who is in the domestic and family abuse space.

Statistically, each of us will know someone who is currently experiencing or has experienced domestic and family abuse, or has been impacted by Domestic Abuse in some way.

There is so much in this book. These are some of the things I would highlight that Jess covers in the book –

- **Psychological Abuse:** Coercion and control - is extremely damaging to the victim. Coercive control is based on patterns of behaviour. The book references views of victim survivors of domestic abuse and they say that while the physical abuse is bad, the psychological abuse has had the most detrimental impact on them. Being scrutinized at every turn, the constant humiliation, the gas lighting, degradation, the name calling and surveillance leaves people feeling they have lost their sense of self. Being told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, makes them feel trapped. This type of abuse has a lasting impact, and it is frustrating because other people do not see it. Some victim survivors who are subject to psychological abuse often say, "*I wish he would just hit me*" so that someone could see what is happening.
- Coercive control or intimate terrorism – is not new. There are parallels between Prisoners of War and victims of Domestic Abuse.
- Following the opening of Women's Refuges in the 1970s it was noticed that nearly all the stories of the women were similar, in that they followed a similar pattern, *and* they resembled the accounts of a seemingly unrelated group of survivors: returned prisoners of war. Jess Hill talks about the end of the Korean War and the confusion of the American's when POWs returned and were aligned with the "enemy", betraying their country. A social scientist with the US Airforce Albert Biderman decided to investigate what was going on. After extensive interviews with returned POWs Biderman's saw that compliance was won using age-old methods of *coercive control*. These methods were based primarily on simple, easily understandable ideas of how an individual's physical and moral strength can be undermined.

Biderman established that three primary elements were at the heart of coercive control: **Dependency, Debility and Dread**. And to achieve this effect, the captors used eight techniques:

- Isolation
- Monopolisation of perception
- Induced debility or exhaustion
- Cultivation of anxiety and despair
- Alternation of punishment and reward
- Demonstrations of omnipotence
- Degradation
- Enforcement of trivial demands.

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- Most women who are in coercive control environments do not realise that they are being abused and they feel responsible for their situation. They do not want to leave because the perpetrator makes them feel guilty to leave and they feel stripped of their sense of self or their identity.
- England and Wales introduced *Controlling and Coercive behaviour* into the *Serious Crime Act 2015*. It is defined as,
 - (A) repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another person (B) that is controlling or coercive.
 - At the time of the behaviour, (A) and (B) are personally connected.
 - The behaviour has a serious effect on (B.)
 - (A) knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on (B).

Currently, in Queensland, coercive control is not specifically captured under the Criminal Code though the government is *looking into* potential coercive control laws.

- There is an interesting chapter in the book about traits of perpetrators, specifically 'shame' and 'humiliated fury'. Some studies have shown that attacking others is a shame response in that attacking others can replace feelings of shame with pride. It is highly concerning that this pride may be short lived, and the act of attacking can lead to someone feeling even *more* shame – and this is where we see shame at its most destructive: "humiliated fury".
- Jess refers to the 'Underground' in her book. This is the place where victims of domestic abuse are metaphorically living. She acknowledges that it can take time for a victim to feel **able to leave**. This is because of the degradation, loss of self, and the gaslighting they have been exposed to, potentially for many, many years.
- It seems a lot of abusers don't realise that coercion and control with words/body language/voice inflection/a 'look' is psychological abuse. I have worked as Duty Lawyer at the Magistrates Court in Townsville early in my career and heard Respondents say many times: "*But I didn't hit her*". Physical abuse is only one aspect of Domestic Abuse.

If you are experiencing domestic abuse – OSheaDyer Solicitors can help you. We have experienced lawyers who work in this area and who understand the issues.

We believe, the more you know, the safer it is for you.

We can put you in touch with people who can support you and we are here to explain what you can do legally and to represent you.

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Where you can get help in Townsville

Services:

Services in Townsville who can help initially, or provide you with further information / options to set you up in a safe environment:

1. North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service
2. Women's Centre
3. Police

Useful links:

<https://nqdvrs.org.au/>

<https://www.rizeup.com.au/>

<https://www.1800respect.org.au/>

<https://www.dvconnect.org/>

<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/subjects/family-and-domestic-violence>

Books:

Another excellent read is *Blame Changer* by Carmel O'Brien.
