

Desperation point:

Living in fear of the one you love

VICTORIA FRUEAN talks to one of the thousands of New Zealanders subjected to domestic violence. Illustration by **SPIKE MOUNTJOY**.

At 1am Helen was woken by her partner and told she was "going to get it".

She was dragged from her bed, pushed from wall to wall, punched and berated. Her partner of eight years – bourbon still strong on his breath – accused her of being seen with another man. She tried to defend herself but wanted to stay quiet for fear of waking the kids.

It's a scenario Helen (not her real name) has been in too many times. As she recalls the beating, her make-up does little to hide the black eyes and the finger shaped bruises around her neck. But she is grateful she can relax for eight hours before she sees her partner again.

Helen is just one of thousands of victims of domestic violence occurring in New Zealand homes.

In an attempt to stop it, the Campaign for Action on Family Violence was launched last month and is an initiative of the Taskforce for Action on Violence within Families, established in 2005.

It is led by the Ministry of Social Development and the Families Commission and supported by the Accident Compensation Corporation, the Ministry of Health and the New Zealand Police. It is intended to last four years.

Stephanie Edmond, communications advisor for Family and Community Services, says the campaign is all about "raising awareness and changing attitudes towards family violence".

"We need something like TV as a mass media to get the message across that domestic violence occurs in all classes, nationalities and neighbourhoods," says Edmond.

"In New Zealand it is so widespread and serious we can't ignore it any more."

Sheryl Hann, outreach coordinator and researcher for the New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, says it is a misconception that an abuser is a certain type of person.

"They are judges, police officers and businessmen," says Hann.

"It's not confined to a single age, class or ethnicity. This is why it's been such a silent issue for so long. People think about family violence in terms of them and not me."

On average 14 women, six men and 10 children are killed by a member of their family every year.

Family violence is behind half of all murders in New Zealand.

Helen, a 27-year-old employment consultant, says her abusive relationship has got progressively worse.

"It started with just constant

arguing. He was jealous of my family and the amount of time I spent with them and was insecure about my previous partner," she says.

"At first he just used to push me around. Then it accelerated over the years when he realised I was no longer mentally or physically strong enough to fight back."

One in three women experience physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime, according to a University of Auckland study.

Just over one in five men are subjected to violence by their partners.

The true extent of domestic violence in New Zealand has been in the "private sphere"

for too long, according to Sheryl Hann.

"They think what happens in the home stays in the home and it's nobody else's business to intervene. We need to think about it as a social issue as it impacts the whole of society. It has an effect on our education system, work force and health system," she says.

The annual cost of family violence in New Zealand is at least \$1.2 billion, based on notifications to police.

The campaign comes at a time when domestic violence has been raised in a number of high-profile murder cases.

The most recent was the murder of An An Liu, reportedly a victim of domestic violence and allegedly killed by her husband Nai Yin Xue.

Edmond is pleased the New Zealand news media is covering domestic violence more extensively now.

"Often when a woman is murdered as a result of domestic violence it's either hidden in a small brief in the newspaper or excuses are made for the murderer," says Edmond.

She says people should not listen to abusers who use terms like "angry episode" or a "moment of rage".

"After they've beat their partner they will say they couldn't control their anger or they just lost it. But they're making excuses. These people are actually really good at controlling their anger. They don't go around hitting people. They don't punch their boss or someone in a shop," she says.

Helen says her partner always comes up with a justification.

"Afterwards he'll say he's sorry and that he didn't know what he was doing and something just came over him. Other times he just laughs at me," she says.

The problem with identifying family violence is many people think it is only physical, Hann says.

"This is why so many people turn a blind eye. If they don't see any injuries, they think nothing is wrong," she says.

Helen suffers from emotional and physical abuse daily.

"He calls me names, tells me I'm fat, I'm mental and no one will ever love me. He punches me and hits and kicks my face, head and body. He pulls my hair and throws me across the room and into the wall," she says.

If she had the choice she would choose a beating over constant put-downs, she says.

"It's the emotional abuse that really sticks with you. Bruises heal. I've become immune to pain. But it will never ever stop hurting to hear him call me fat and ugly every day," she says.

More than 17,700 women and 12,161 children used the services of women's refuges during 2005 and 2006.

Police deal with more than 70,000 family violence calls a year but estimate only 28 per cent of incidents are reported.

Edmond says it is difficult to establish why New Zealand has such high rates.

"Perhaps New Zealand men can't handle their feelings. They have this macho idea that they're not supposed to tell people they're having a hard time," she says. "Most murders happen to women who leave their partners and this suggests they can't handle rejection."

Meanwhile Helen puts it down to her partner's upbringing.

"He was raised in a violent family. His dad was an alcoholic who hit his mother and drugs and alcohol were openly available. All of this seems normal to him," she says.

Whatever the reasons for it, the question still remains: why do people stay in abusive relationships?

"It's a natural thing for people to ask, but it's not that simple," says Hann.

"They are in very real danger if they
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Sometimes
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have no access to funding because their partners have taken away their wages."

Helen has tried to leave three times but admits she can't help going back.

"I know people think I'm stupid but he kept contacting me, apologising and saying how much he loved me. He threatened to kill himself and I'm not mentally strong enough to deal with that kind of pressure," she says.

People seem to think she got herself into the situation so she needs to deal with it. As a result she has stopped telling people altogether.

"I tried so many different counsellors but only one helped and I couldn't afford to keep going to her as she cost \$90 an hour. It's easier to not talk about it at all."

The New Zealand health system needs to be better equipped to deal with family violence says Jane Koziol-McLain, associate professor at the AUT University trauma research unit.

Her research has shown health care professionals tend to change the subject and prescribe medication when confronted with family violence victims.

"Society has been tuned not to talk about family violence and the health care system has been socialised to do the same," says Koziol-McLain.

"We are trying to educate health-care professionals on how to properly deal with victims and families."

The long lasting effects on abused women and children are profound, says Koziol-McLain.

"Women get headaches, are more likely to commit suicide and suffer from depression.

"Children have behavioural problems as a result of being abused and witnessing abuse."

Helen says she is a completely different person since the abuse began.

"I look in the mirror and can't believe what kind of person I've become. I'm withdrawn, have no self esteem, can't trust people and suffer from depression. It's sad to think there are thousands of women out there who feel exactly the same."

