

John's Story

I was a victim of coercive control by my narcissistic father throughout most of my life. In my childhood he constantly dominated me and it continued as I grew up – he decided where I worked (for him), where I'd get a mortgage and where I'd live – he lent me the deposit for my house which further ingrained his control of my life as it felt the house was partly his. At work I was systematically humiliated by him, there was name calling, belittling me in front of the other members of staff – which meant the staff didn't respect me and it even went as far that the delivery drivers decided not to deliver my customers their orders as a sign of disrespect; this was then blamed on me and I was belittled and disciplined in front of staff, a vicious circle.

I had on so many occasions announced that I was leaving work only to be sneered at and told that I wouldn't be able to get another job, particularly earning the kind of money I was with him (which was in fact below the National Average) and I should be forever grateful to him. He would then approach me in private and tell me that I was needed and that I was the best salesman he had ever had; I saw as an apology but in fact it was simply gaslighting. It was another form of getting his own way, manipulating me, twisting my already fragile mind into thinking that I needed him.

I think the worse part of all his abusive behaviour was that everybody saw me as the problem and only saw my father as a kind man, trying to look after me. He did everything for anyone else, he was so kind to them. I was told so often how lucky I was to have it so easy, to have a job which I could not lose, my friends joked that I was lazy and to have a father who would look after me to the extent he did was a blessing. I realised how blind others were to his abuse when on Father's Day my friend said, "I hope you have got something decent for your dad after everything he does for you". On top of that, my brother resented me as he felt I should have been sacked years ago as my lack of interest in the work was so apparent; we never really had a relationship again.

At age 34 and after a steady decline of my mental health and growing addiction, I lost my wife and my daughter. We had to sell the house in the divorce and my father stepped in to apparently 'save the day' - he told us that he would pay off any debts (which were in fact minimal) and buy the house for the value of the mortgage which was at the time roughly £25k under the market value. I wanted to move into a flat but he told me I should save my money and rent my house back and, of course, I did. I hated it as I had memories of my family there in happier times, it broke me and so my addiction grew. My appliances stopped working and for 5 years I lived with no central heating or hot water, the electrics failed and for a year I had no means to cook food as the oven and hob broke – my father refused to get them fixed and I simply put up with it. Freezing and sleeping in a hat and scarf, my addiction took my suffering away. My father's control was ever present and sometimes masked in kindness; he would ring me up and say I was going to put him in his grave with the way I treat him regards money and then call again and ask if I had enough money to go out; then he would offer to give me money which enabled me to go out and drink the pain away, then the next day tell me what he thought of it. I had daily thoughts of suicide and eventually the thoughts no longer were enough, my escapism was either sleep or drugs, but it got to a point that those two weren't enough.

At 37 years old I was man who suffered with epilepsy, severe depression and array of other disorders, my father threw the name "John Never-Well" at me regularly which caused immense self-hatred and self-doubt. The number of psychologists I had seen was probably

into double figures as I felt like I was the one who messed up everybody else's life and I deserved the life that was unfolding before my eyes. I then stopped seeing any professionals as my father told me he wanted reports, which obviously he couldn't have, but I believed this such was his power that I stopped seeking help for my mental health.

My father's control last right up until the age of 40 when I finally managed to step away. I saw and heard other peoples' struggles similar to mine, men who would go out and fight due to the built-up hatred they had for their fathers and themselves, men who turned to drugs and alcohol to help blur their suffering. I finally understood that my self-sabotage, self-harm and catastrophic loss was because I had been a victim of somebody else's damaged mental health. His control was so strong that I was living in fear of a man 30 years my senior who was frail, an alcoholic and miserable, the fear of him was in my mind. Only now can I see why the empty feeling I had for most of life was due to me searching for what made him happy and not myself.

I have spent time now reconnecting with myself and learning that I can make my own choices in life, nobody has any right to speak to me in a way I decide is inappropriate or in a way which I would not speak to them. I have a choice to walk away. My worst days now are infinitely better than my best days before. I no longer people-please or wonder whether my actions would make somebody else happy instead of making me happy; I have found confidence and through my experiences I have found strength and meaning.

I hope by reading this people in a similar situation can see that they are not alone in their experiences. We are strong, it is those that abuse us that are the weak ones; I pity my father and now I'm stronger he is afraid to contact me. I now work with people who have been through the same trials as me, my passion is to help prevent people from feeling the way I did and doing the things I did. If you are suffering please know that there are people that can help you.

If you want to contact John and speak to him about your own experiences, then email fundraising@lwa.org.uk and we will pass your email on.