

Collaborative care leads to better place for Polly

Putting trust in strangers to help you in the midst of chaos takes courage, particularly when life has taken a turn you never expected and left you struggling to fully function.

A client who linked with the Centre Against Violence (CAV) to get support in leaving a relationship made the difficult journey to leave an abusive partner and get her family away from an unsafe environment. CAV Family Violence Crisis Care Advocate Maddi Tobias and HRCLS family violence lawyer Jodie Wells helped her put a plan in place and encouraged her every step as she started on the road to recovery.

Looking back, Polly* believes her life could have been vastly worse, even fatally so, without the intervention of a combined legal and family violence support approach. In this instance, taking a leap of faith was the right course of action that landed Polly and her children to a safer life.

Stepping through to reality

When Polly connected with CAV, the first step was to complete a risk assessment. Maddi took Polly through this important process. “This is done to give us an idea of the situation, and guides the advice and support we give people going forward.”

Maddi said Polly’s circumstances were quite significant. “She wanted to leave the relationship, and this first step showed she was ready to do this.”

Polly’s decision to access CAV had a deep impact, as the reality of her situation hit home. “It felt as though my denial finally shattered. I was in such a surreal space; I was traumatised and very scared.”

Polly had been telling herself she was in a happy marriage and was making excuses for what was happening. “But the abuse had gotten so bad. It was terrifying.”

Compounding matters, Polly’s trust in herself and self-worth had disappeared as the relationship deteriorated.

“It was really difficult to take that first step because it made it very real. I knew I was in a really dangerous situation and I felt so vulnerable. I was reliant on the expert advice because I couldn’t think straight and could barely function.”

Right move at the right time

Maddi went with Polly to court for an interim IVO application. This was the start of a long process to get an undertaking from her ex-partner. Maddi said it was important Polly could convey her experience to the court. “I helped her complete the IVO in her words, and with the assistance of our family violence knowledge, this would help the court be responsive to her application.”

Breaches soon followed after the interim IVO was successfully made. Maddi was there for support and to help make sense of the situation. “My approach then was to always be available for Polly when she needed me, and help her identify if a breach had occurred.”

The lack of consequences for the early breaches left Polly deflated and questioning if she had done the right thing. “She really struggled with it, as it seemed as though nothing was happening.”

Maddi encouraged Polly that reporting the breaches when they occurred would eventually have an impact. Maddi’s support focused on making sure Polly understood that what was happening was to be expected. “It was about normalising the experience for her and explaining how the police had steps they had to take.”

As part of the support, Maddi would follow up with police to make sure the matter was still receiving their attention.

Faith in IVO process questioned

After the IVO was made, local police made a mistake that left Polly upset with their conduct, and led to her feeling unsafe, undermined and more uncertain she had made the right call on heeding the advice to get an IVO.

Jodie contacted police to explain what had occurred and get an assurance the situation would be addressed. This helped to return power to Polly at a time when she honestly felt she had no chance of succeeding against her ex-partner and that he even had the police on his side. The positive response from local police was important for validating her experience and allowing her to be heard and believed. It also restored some faith that the process would lead to her and her family being safe.

Light at the end of the tunnel

CAV made their referral to HRCLS for Polly to start putting things in place to leave the relationship. “I couldn’t have done it by myself and had no idea where to start,” she said. “It was taking everything for me just to stand upright and look after the kids.”

“Jodie gave me a clear, definitive plan. She broke down the plan into really little steps of what I needed to do before I ended the relationship.” The plan, which included having important documents kept in a safe place, gave her direction at a time when Polly felt incapable of making decisions and worn down from the situation.

And despite her better judgement at the time, she followed Jodie’s advice. “I thought, ‘this is overkill, I won’t need to do this’ and what she was telling me went against what I was thinking. But Jodie seemed so confident in knowing how my partner would react, and she came across as very experienced in dealing with this. “So I took a leap of faith and decided to do everything she said.”

This included workshopping how Polly would end the relationship, what it would look like and how her partner would react to what was happening. As time passed and her ex’s behaviour began to follow how Jodie had described it would.

Taking out the IVO sounded like a drastic and unnecessary measure in Polly’s eyes. “It seemed the stupidest thing to do and would just aggravate him. But I needed that IVO and thank God I had it in place.”

The plan that Polly had put into place also proved to be essential. As time passed, and her personal circumstances took a dive, including being stretched financially, Polly was starting to feel cornered and was wavering on whether to return, as her partner swung from creating fear and saying ‘I love you, I’m sorry’.

“A part of you wants to believe they are sorry, that it has been a big mistake, and things will change and get better.”

Reconnecting for support

When needed, Polly returned to CAV as she struggled with the ongoing behaviour from her ex-partner after the relationship ended. As time progressed Maddi provided emotional support, as other services, including HRCLS stepped in to help.

“I needed to be inquisitive and ask the right questions, and tell her she was on the right path. Although it had been challenging and was over 12 months since the separation, she was making the right decisions.”

Maddi determined Polly could also benefit from the CAV recovery counselling, and linked her in with a colleague to help. Polly met with the counsellor on several occasions to talk through her ordeal and was given advice on how to apply useful strategies to start recovering from the violence she experienced.

In a better place

Without the legal intervention and perspective Jodie brought to the situation, Polly wonders what would have occurred if she had returned to the relationship. Looking back, the motivation she received was likely the difference in her continuing on her own despite the struggle.

“I was in such a bad place. I probably would have ended up going back if it wasn't for the combined support of Jodie and Maddi. It felt so scary standing up to my ex-partner. At the time I thought disobeying him would make us less safe and potentially get us killed. I was so lucky to have Jodie and Maddi leading me to freedom and safety. I couldn't have done it without them.”

*name changed