

'I was hit, I was punched, I was head-butted, I was bruised. I felt trapped, physically and emotionally, and isolated from my friends and family. I felt such a sense of shame that this was happening to me.'



ANDREA MAYES

This quote from a victim of domestic violence is sadly typical of those suffering at the hands of abusive partners — except in one crucial respect. The victim in this instance is male.

Alan Edwards (not his real name) spent three years in an abusive relationship with the mother of his young son before seeking help.

He was verbally and physically abused in front of his son, had his front door kicked down and felt pushed to his emotional limit.

"I'm six foot one and I weigh 90kg, and I would rather be punched in the face by a man than be shamed in this way by a woman," he said. "You can get over the physical damage but the emotional abuse is so much harder. People don't even recognise that it's there for a start.

"The shame comes from a lack of support. If people are supporting and validating me, the shame doesn't land. Nobody told me that I was right and she was wrong. The shame can't be relieved, so it doesn't go away."

Think domestic violence and chances are you'll picture a woman with a black eye or bruising, one of the graphic images used in government media campaigns of recent years.

What these very successful campaigns fail to mention, however, is that the victims of such violence can be men, too.

It's difficult to get a true understanding of the prevalence of domestic violence against men in Australia, partly because of the extreme reluctance of men to report it. However, it's estimated that about one in three victims of domestic violence in Australia is male, and the effects of such abuse on men can be just as devastating as on women.

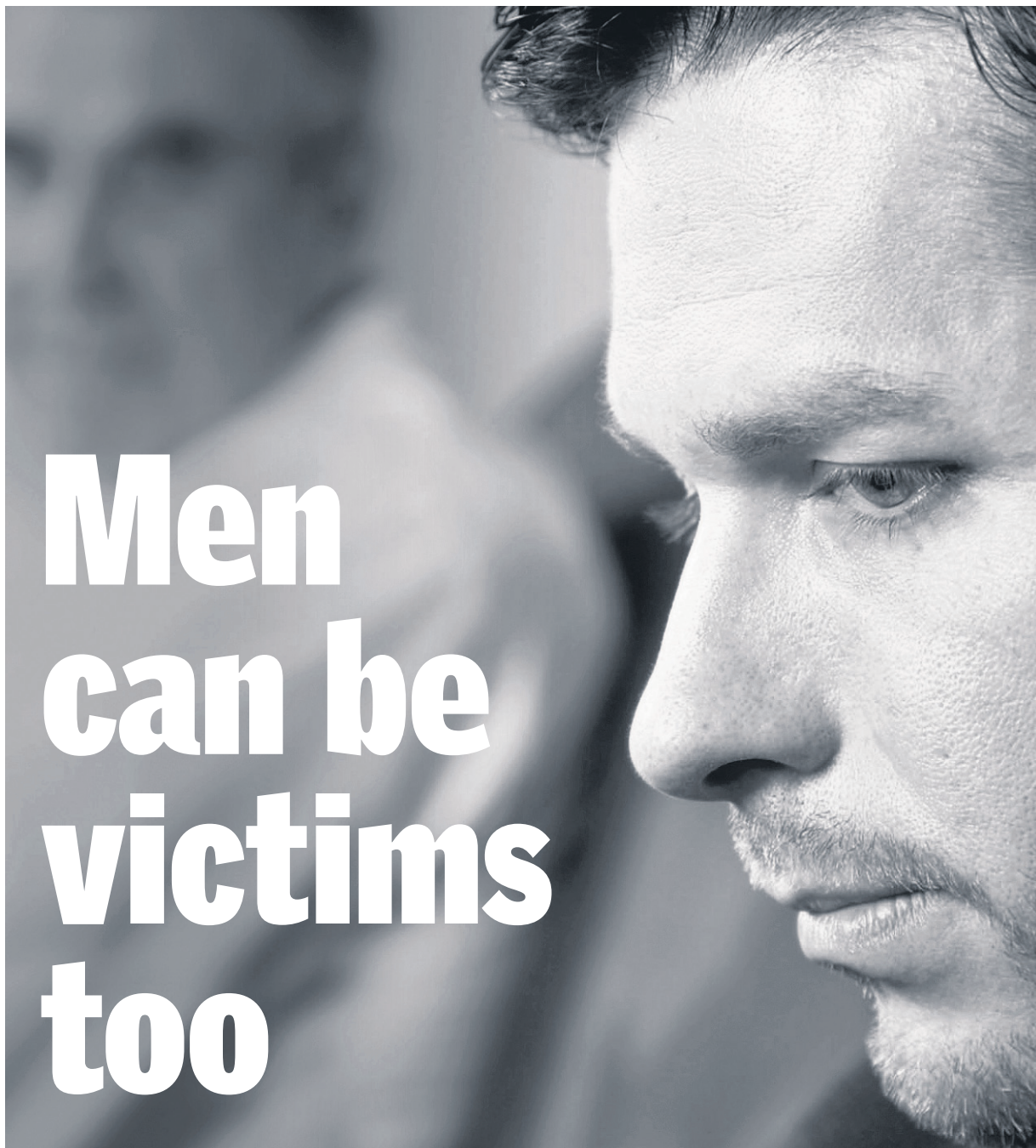
The experience of male victims is the subject of a groundbreaking new study by researchers at Edith Cowan University that will be released next week.

Believed to be the first report in Australia to look in depth at men's experiences of domestic violence, the Intimate Partner Abuse of Men study was commissioned by the Men's Advisory Network and interviewed male victims, family members who had witnessed the effect of the abuse, and service providers.

It found that men suffered from a similar range of abuse as women, from physical, verbal and sexual to psychological, financial and social isolation.

"Abuse against the person ranged from punching, biting, scratching, spitting and the throwing of objects at men, to the spiking of their drinks," the report found.

Men reported being repeatedly



Men can be victims too

put down and humiliated, being forced to submit to sex against their will, having their financial affairs controlled and being cut off from their family and friends. The report also identified the new category of legal administrative abuse, where women use things such as violence restraining orders inappropriately to deliberately hurt their partners.

Psychologist Elizabeth Celi, who specialises in men's health, says domestic violence against men often takes the form of emotional abuse, making it harder to detect than physical abuse.

She says people often assume that men don't feel hurt by emotional abuse because they don't talk about it, yet their sense of shame, failure and self-doubt can be more acute than that of female victims.

"Men's health is intricately wrapped up in men's identity," she

says. "Female perpetrators can attack him physically, and worse yet, attack his role as a father, a worker and a man in his own right. So the emotional impact on a man's self-confidence and subsequent mental health problems can be grossly underestimated.

"Just because he doesn't verbalise it doesn't mean he doesn't feel it."

Greg Andresen, a spokesman for the One in Three campaign, which aims to raise public awareness of family violence against men, says the popular belief that men are tough and can look after themselves physically was backed up by statistics that showed more women than men suffered from physical abuse in relationships.

"But often the worse damage to men comes from the emotional and psychological abuse," he says. "Having your life controlled in such a way that you're utterly powerless, not being allowed to see your friends and family and not having money to spend — these sort of impacts are the same whether you're a burly six-foot bloke or a petite woman."

Dr Celi says men can become suicidal when the abuse is at its most severe.

'The emotional impact on a man's self-confidence and subsequent mental health problems can be grossly underestimated.'

PSYCHOLOGIST
ELIZABETH CELI



"There was nowhere for me to go and that was one of the biggest problems.

"Not only was I isolated on a country farm with this violent person, when I went to seek services there was very little they could do for me and, even if they wanted to, there was very little understanding of how it is for men. And it's different for men than it is for women."

ECU researcher Alfred Allan said there were no services specifically for men as victims of domestic violence.

"We found that when men finally did pluck up the courage to report their abuse, there was nowhere for them to turn or they felt they simply were not believed," Professor Allan said.

"A lot of the service providers we interviewed felt really sorry for the men and wanted to help them but simply could not because they didn't have the facilities or experience."

Community Services Minister Robyn McSweeney says the support services offered to domestic violence victims "are not gender specific and can therefore be accessed by anyone presenting as a victim or perpetrator of family and domestic violence".

She says women and children experience violence at much greater rates than men do and although male victims could use crisis care and helplines, "the majority of male callers present as perpetrators of violence seeking help to change their behaviour".

Similarly, government and media campaigns targeting women and children as victims of domestic violence "are most often designed to help reduce the high rates at which the most vulnerable within our community experience violence within an intimate or family relationship".

Ironically, the success of such media campaigns may have contributed to the problems men face getting help.

Dr Celi believes these campaigns have helped create the impression that only men can be perpetrators and only women can be victims.

"The much needed work in recent decades in raising awareness for female victims has created the unfortunate and ridiculous side-effect of making all men out to be potential perpetrators and erroneously viewing them with caution," Dr Celi says.

"Male victims are then approached with negative judgments and far less compassion and empathy than female victims which is simply inequitable. We need to remember that any forms of abuse and violence against anyone, regardless of gender, are simply unacceptable."

Men's Advisory Network executive officer Gary Bryant backs the report's recommendations for government-funded public awareness campaigns, for publicly-funded services for male victims, and for training for people working in health and welfare to help them assist male victims.

"We're not trying to say that men are not the perpetrators of domestic violence, but what we are saying is that men can be victims too and that they need appropriate support services and systems," he says.

Mr Edwards was one of the lucky ones.

Having had previous professional experience in the area of men's health, he was eventually able to get some support from former colleagues.

"They ended up validating me, which was at least enough for me to hold my own, and helped me see that I had to get out," he says.

For three years he lost the hands-on parenting role he had previously enjoyed with his son, but eventually won a Family Court order giving him shared custody.

"Now I've got a court order she seems to understand and things have got better," he says.