

THE RISE OF WOMEN FEARING FOR THEIR LIVES DURING LOCKDOWN

As the number of calls alerting authorities to domestic violence soars, Closer investigates what can be done to protect families at risk

When Abi Blake married Sebastian Swamy in November 2014,

she thought she had found The One. But just weeks into their marriage, he started to display violent, coercive behaviour. Three years later, he launched a shockingly savage attack that left Abi physically and mentally scarred. Mum-of-two Abi, 42, tells Closer, "Although I escaped Sebastian, I'll never recover from his abuse. If my children and I had been forced into lockdown with him, I'm not sure we'd have survived it."

Sadly, 1.6 million women in the UK experienced domestic abuse last year. Now, as the country enters its fourth week of lockdown during the COVID-19 crisis, charities warn of a surge in cases while families are trapped. Just last month, during the second week of lockdown, NHS nurse Victoria Woodhall, 31, and retired supermarket worker Ruth Williams, 67, were killed – both their husbands have appeared in court, accused of murder. Their trials will take place later this year. Another

woman, Kelly Fitzgibbons, 40, and her two young daughters were shot dead in a murder-suicide by husband and father Robert Needham.

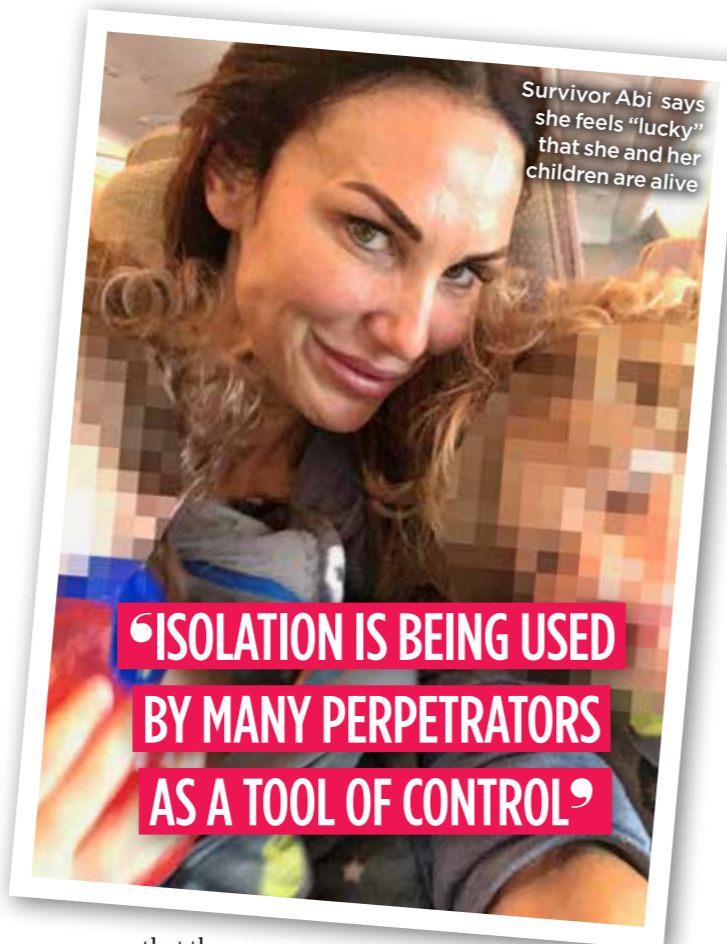
Last week, charity Refuge reported that calls had soared by a shocking 120 per cent in just one day. Sandra Horley CBE, Chief Executive of National Domestic Abuse Charity Refuge, says, "Since the UK lockdown measures were announced, calls to our helpline have increased, while visits to the website increased by 150 per cent. We know that, ordinarily, the window of opportunity for women with abusive partners to seek help is often very limited. Now, it is likely that window has become even smaller. Families in isolation can potentially aggravate pre-existing abusive behaviours by perpetrators, as women and children are likely to be spending concentrated periods of time with them. Domestic abuse is much more than physical violence – isolation is already used by many perpetrators as a tool of control. "Our refuges are still operating and we want to

assure women that there is somewhere safe for them to go if they need to leave their home. We have put in place a range of measures to keep our residents safe in the context of COVID-19. We urge survivors, concerned friends or family members, neighbours and colleagues to read our safety guide, so they know where to access help, and what to do if they, or someone they know,

needs help. Visit Refuge.org.uk/covid19-survivor-tips."

EXPLOSIVE RAGES

Abi began dating Sebastian, 41, in May 2014, through a mutual friend. Abi, from Cheshire, says, "Sebastian was charming, and he got on well with my then three-year-old son from a previous relationship, Harry." It wasn't until Abi married



Survivor Abi says she feels "lucky" that she and her children are alive

ISOLATION IS BEING USED BY MANY PERPETRATORS AS A TOOL OF CONTROL



Domestic abuse cases soar as lockdown takes its toll

Coronavirus: Domestic abuse calls up 25% since lockdown, charity says

Sebastian in November 2014 that she noticed his behaviour turning violent and manipulative.

She recalls, "Sebastian often burst into unpredictable, explosive rages, fuelled by alcohol. His angry fits became worse during bank holidays or Christmas, when he'd stock up on booze and dominate the house. Holidays like Christmas weren't happy family occasions –

they were periods when we were stuck indoors with a monster."

In August 2015, Abi got pregnant. She says, "He was never afraid to hit me or scream in my face, even when I was carrying his child. I worked long shifts as a manager at Manchester Airport right up until my due date, just to avoid being alone with him.

"Sebastian's behaviour didn't change after I gave birth to our son, Edward, in June 2016. My friends begged me to leave Sebastian, but I was too afraid he'd kill me if I tried."

SCARED & LONELY

But in July 2017, when Abi mustered the courage to leave Sebastian, he launched one last horrifying attack. Abi says, "My kids were at a sleepover when I told Sebastian I wanted a divorce. As I turned away from him, I felt two blows to

the back of my neck. I fell to the ground and he stamped on my throat and chest until I lost consciousness. He snatched my phone and fled. I managed to drag myself into the street and neighbours phoned 999."

Abi was treated for five broken ribs, two fractured vertebrae and a punctured lung. Sebastian was arrested and charged with grievous bodily harm (GBH) and spent six months in prison – he's since been released.

Abi says, "While Sebastian walks free, I'm now suffering from PTSD. But I feel lucky that my children and I are alive. During COVID-19, we've been told to stay at home for our own safety. I can now call my home a safe place but, sadly, for millions of women, it's the opposite. I hope this pandemic has taught us all to look out more for vulnerable people." By Bella Evennett-Watts



Abi says ex-husband Sebastian turned into a "monster"

HOW TO HELP

- Keep an eye on friends and neighbours. If you are worried about someone, make sure they know the number for the Refuge's helpline: 0808 2000 247. In an emergency, call 999.
- If survivors are unable to call, they can visit Nationaldahelpline.org.uk to fill in an online form and request a safe time to be called back.
- Women can also receive guidance via Refuge's chatbot on how to secure devices such as phones, so that perpetrators can't unlock them. Visit Refuge.org.uk for more info.