

Social Work Online Team Training (SWOTT) toolkit

Us Too: Domestic abuse, sexual violence & people with learning disabilities and autistic people

CASE STUDY TWO – MISHA

Facilitator guidance notes

Misha's story is the combined experience of a number of women in the Us Too team. All the words that she speaks come from one or other of the team members.

I have always just wanted to be loved.

People with learning disabilities crave the same life experiences as anyone else but have limited opportunities to do so. This can make them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Then I met Jack and he was lovely. Everyone loved him.

The Us Too team's experiences were that their abusers often 'flew under the radar' by coupling a charming persona that was present in group situations with an abusive personality in private. This made disclosure much more difficult with friends and family often disbelieving the victim of abuse.

He treated me like a grown up, buying me drinks and taking me out to the casino.

People with learning disabilities are often infantilised and continue to be treated like children into adulthood. A number of the Us Too team spoke of their abuser being the first person who had treated them like an adult. A powerful and seductive experience.

When he loses, he borrows money from me. I never get it back, but I don't mind, it's what you do if you love someone.

It is unsurprising that it is so easy to take advantage of someone who has absorbed (and perhaps misunderstood) the narratives of co-dependency as being at the heart of a good relationship. Indeed, the Court of Protection has deemed that understanding that couples have financial responsibilities towards each other forms part of the capacity test for consent to marriage.

Two months ago, Jack started telling me what to do the whole time, and he always needed to know where I was, who I was with. He says he is just looking after me.

Coercive control has been found to be a particularly significant feature in DA/SV involving disabled people. The notion of being 'looked after' will have been internalised as essential by many people with learning disabilities as this message will have been present throughout their lives.



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Jack was always fun to be with, and I wanted to please him, but now he says I don't need my friends, I have him, and that's all I need.

Perpetrators tactics of separating their victims from their existing sources of support is common and widely experienced by members of the Us Too team. Another common narrative is also in play here – that of the romantic, all-consuming love, that negates any other needs.

Jack has a temper and has started smashing things when we row. He tells me it is all my fault, that I made him angry.

Victim-blaming is another common feature of relationships involving DA/SV. Again, a common experience of the Us Too team was being made to feel responsible for their abuser's emotions and emotional regulation.

I didn't think I could get pregnant, but I missed my last period. Jack has always told me he wanted me to have a baby, but I am frightened to tell him.

How does Misha feel about her possible pregnancy? What support arrangements and agencies will you need to put in place? Jack wanting Misha to have children may also indicate coercive control. The fact that Misha is frightened to tell Jack, despite this apparently being something he would be pleased with, suggests that Misha knows (perhaps unconsciously) that this is another element of power and control. It also indicates some insight with Misha that can be built on to help her escape the relationship.

He hasn't hurt me yet, but some of my friends are scared of him, and they tell me I should get out. I think I might, but I don't know how and I am frightened.

When the Us Too team discussed their experiences and said what formed the basis of a good response, these were their key messages to social workers:

- Listen to me
- Believe me
- Take it seriously
- Comfort me
- Explain my choices
- Help me do what I want
- Encourage and support me to talk to the right people (e.g. DA/SV support agencies; counsellors; the Police; my family)
- Be a resource (e.g. know the contact details of support agencies)

