

Don't suffer in silence

A Fife woman who was strangled by her ex-partner has spoken exclusively to The Courier's **Michael Alexander** about her violent experiences and has urged others not to suffer in silence . . .

THE 44-YEAR-OLD mother-of-three, who spoke on condition of anonymity but who we will call Louise, had been married previously but found herself in an abusive relationship, which ended in December 2012 after one and a half years.

"Before I went into this relationship, I considered myself to be quite well educated and quite confident. I had worked in a male environment for years, so I was confident around men.

"I had been single for one and a half years following a dysfunctional marriage. I started seeing my boyfriend, who was a friend of a friend, and he was lovely. If I went out with my friends, we would spend all night texting each other. I thought this was so romantic.

"But as the months wore on, the relationship became suffocating. He started to become jealous of people I spoke to. I got text messages asking where I was and who I'd been speaking to.

"He was particularly jealous of a female friend. I stopped seeing my friends.

"He made comments about the clothes I wore. If I was going out, he would say I was 'dressed tarty'.

"He'd say: 'You are not going out like that, are you? You'll look like a slut if you go out like that'. I changed the way I dressed.

"If I took the little one to playgroup, he would question why I was speaking to other dads.

"Bit by bit my confidence dropped and I ended up with low self-esteem.

"I began to drink more as a coping strategy and was on anti-depressants. I was drinking around two bottles of wine per night per week.

"He was drinking more — using my money because he was unemployed — and buying more drink for me.

"As time went on, he was 'in my face' more often. I felt threatened.

"He said he'd never hit a woman before, and he didn't — he tried to strangle me.

"Two nights after I'd been for a night out, we were having a meal in the house and drinking again.

"By this time, I'd already attended the Freedom Programme at Saje Scotland to seek help.

"I lied about it to him and said I'd been at a self-esteem course. The night he kicked off because I had been attending the course, I switched on the voice recorder on my phone when he became aggressive. I knew something was going to happen. I recorded the incident when he was highly aggressive, shouting, swearing, calling me offensive names.

"He ended up strangling me.

"When the incident happened, the children saw what was going on. They were really frightened. I tried to get them out the way. I think it's only because they came in, that he stopped.

"He had his hands around my neck and there were marks left on my face and chin.

"I phoned the police, who were there within minutes. They were very good. They dealt with it really well.

"He was taken to the cells overnight. He was arrested and appeared in court the next day. There were bail conditions in place and he was told to stay away.

"The next day, I felt terrible. I was really upset and emotional. I missed him. I still loved him. I thought I must be crazy.

"I phoned Saje Scotland and someone there had a coffee with me.

"The case went to court on charges of threatening and violent behaviour, assault to injury and damage/vandalism — he

"He said he'd never hit a woman before and he didn't — he strangled me."



smashed my phone. The threatening/violent behaviour charge was dropped. He was admonished on the others.

"I think there is a lack of understanding from the agencies about the impact this can have on someone's whole life.

"It was my kids as well. My little one is not too bad but the middle one has had to get a lot of therapy.

"She stopped going to school because she didn't want to leave me alone at home in case he came back.

"She became violent against the little one. She went to the Cedar Project (Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery).

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NOT ACCEPTABLE

Domestic violence is not acceptable in Fife and never will be — that is the message from Fife Chief Superintendent Garry McEwan.

In an interview with The Courier last year, he challenged perpetrators to stop committing these acts and warned if they don't, they will be targeted by police officers and locked up.

While research shows the overall likelihood of becoming a victim of violent crime is falling, one aspect that has shown an increase in Fife over the previous year is domestic or private-space violence, which is up 7.2% to 3,901 incidents.

Mr McEwan said this rise could be attributed to the more "proactive and intrusive manner" in which all such incidents reported to the police are now assessed and investigated.

He said the rise was a direct result of a more focused and determined approach to tackling this issue and emphasised police will continue supporting the victims of these acts, ensuring that they are protected.

Mr McEwan said: "Local organisational changes, including the introduction of a Fife Division Domestic Abuse Investigation Unit (DAIU), have significantly altered the way we deal with and report domestic violence in Fife.

"In this respect, the officers within the DAIU are responsible for proactive targeting of domestic abuse perpetrators. This action has revealed a clearer picture of the true extent of such crime."

Mr McEwan said to enable the police to deal more effectively with the hidden crime of domestic violence, early intervention, prevention and diversion activities are championed at local community policing level.

This has included the creation of a Private Space Violence Working Group, specifically established to address the identified increase in violence within homes.

Saje Scotland — helping women take control

AFTER THE incident, Louise walked about looking at the ground for six months.

But she said the Freedom Project did "so much" for her.

Based at Ore Valley Business Centre, 93 Main Street, Lochgelly, the project is run under the auspices of Saje Scotland — a charity and social enterprise organisation, which aims to reduce and prevent domestic abuse in Scotland.

This is done by facilitating groups. The programmes are called the Freedom Programme

and the Toolkit for Life, which provides strategies.

Louise said: "The first session I attended, I was so nervous I felt sick.

"Sitting in the group I was so worried about what the other ladies in the group thought of me but it soon became obvious that everyone understood how I felt.

"They too had had similar thoughts or feelings regarding the relationship they were in or how someone in their live could influence and control them.

"It was great to be in a



Janet Henderson.

place and with people who I could talk to and who understood me and why I had stayed in an unhappy relationship for so long.

"I had stopped talking

to my friends about how I felt and hid my feelings from my family.

"The project is delivered in a way that is so effective.

"Sometimes there is humour and sometimes compassion and empathy but the biggest support I felt was the group solidarity.

"It is not a quick fix and through investigating the tactics used and how they were influencing me, my thoughts began to change.

"I had thought my partner was one type of controller — the

persuader — but through the programme, I became aware of the many tactics being used to make me conform to how my partner wanted me to behave.

"By understanding the tactics, I began to change the way I reacted to them and began to take back control of myself, my confidence and esteem.

"I am now trained as a volunteer to the Freedom Project.

"The benefits it gives to women and their children is amazing."

Sally Sinclair and Janet Henderson, who are the

founders of Saje Scotland programme, said: "Saje Scotland's aim is to motivate survivors of domestic violence to live independently without fear of abuse, neglect and harm.

"It is an opportunity for women from all backgrounds to meet and work together through a programme designed to help them make positive choices about their life, to take back control and to increase both their and their children's safety.

"We have already delivered 15 groups across Fife."