

## “I was scared and started pushing Rachel away”

Rachel\*, 33, struggled when her boyfriend, John\*, 35, started taking his abuse out on her

**Rachel says:** “When I met John we had such a strong connection, it felt like we were meant to be together. But after a while he started to find ways to push me away. Sometimes he’d disappear for days, or break things for no reason. He’d drink heavily, get aggressive – sometimes he even saw other girls. We were off and on for a long time, but I always went back to him because we loved each other.

“The day John told me about the abuse, we were supposed to be going out with family. But John was tense and monosyllabic and didn’t want to go, so I went on my own. When I got back, I could see he’d been drinking. ‘There’s something I have to tell you, Rachel,’ he said. ‘I was abused when I was little. And when I was 18, I was raped. I’ve never told anyone, and I don’t know what to do.’ I burst into tears, then hugged him tight. It didn’t change how I felt about him at all. After that, he started going for counselling. Now things are much better – he talks to me more, he’s less aggressive and he’s stopped

drinking. Finally we’re working towards happiness.”

**John says:** “I’d only recently moved to London when I was attacked. I’d got a job at a bar and lived in a flat upstairs with two other guys. But one night they held me down and raped me. I’d already been abused as a child by a family friend, and I felt so hurt and ashamed. I started to feel like it was something I’d done – like I deserved it. But I buried these feelings by drinking heavily and dating lots of girls.

“In relationships, I was always the one who walked away. It seemed like I didn’t care, but deep down I think I felt like I wasn’t good enough to be loved. When I met Rachel, I knew I’d finally found someone special. But I was scared and started driving her away.

“Then one day, I read about a memoir someone had written about abuse and everything came flooding back. The night I told Rachel changed my life. I decided not to go to the police, as I didn’t want my family to know, but I’ve managed to move on. I’m just glad Rachel’s come with me.”

of my dad’s friends, called Terence Michael Wheeler,” says Chris. “He used to take me fishing – I worshipped him and trusted him. But then the abuse started. He made me believe there was nothing wrong with it, saying it was ‘our little secret.’”

But when Chris reached his teens, he started to question what Terry was doing. “I realised he’d just been using me. I refused to see or speak to him, and he backed off. I hated him and what he’d done but, although I wanted to tell people, I found it too difficult and I didn’t want to hurt my parents. So I just avoided him and tried to get on with my life.”

### Keeping quiet

And Chris’s reaction – to block out the abuse – is common. Mary Eleftheriou, a counsellor who works with victims and

their partners, explains, “Men are taught by society to hold their feelings in and to be ‘strong.’ So if you’ve been sexually assaulted and made to feel ‘less of a man,’ it’s even harder to open up about.”

Many male survivors spend their teens and 20s in denial, drinking and partying; maybe sleeping around to ‘prove their masculinity’ or avoiding relationships altogether. Others go to the opposite extreme, like Chris did. “When I met Katherine I thought, ‘Here’s my chance to be normal;’” he says. “Instead of being a victim, I got to be the strong, supportive boyfriend. I ploughed all my efforts into listening to her problems.”

### Feeling frustrated

But while Katherine could lean on Chris for support, she found he preferred to

keep his own problems to himself. “I had no idea about anything Chris had been through,” she says. “He was the strong, silent type, and he didn’t like to talk about his emotions. Initially that was fine, but when things started to change and his mood swings started, I wanted him to open up more. But when I asked him what was wrong, he’d just shrug it off.”

Chris says, “I felt like I couldn’t tell Katherine about the abuse. What if she saw me differently? What if I wasn’t the guy she’d fallen in love with? It was too scary to think about, so I just kept quiet.”

But, as Mary explains, eventually all the hurt, shame and anguish that abuse victims hold inside will begin to leak out. “They have to cope with feelings of anger, guilt and confusion, and may have issues with control, trust and sex. And, to put >