

it bluntly, the person closest to them gets all the crap.”

Chris was no exception: “I’d put all my feelings about Terry in a box and tried to forget them, but I couldn’t. I’d get angry and frustrated.”

He also started drinking. “Before, he’d just have a few beers when we were out,” recalls Katherine. “But then he started drinking at home, knocking back glass after glass of brandy. I was so worried.”

“Nothing prepares you for your partner saying he was abused”

Opening up

Despite the negative impact that silence has on their well-being and that of their partners, men like Chris find it very hard to get help. According to the NSPCC, 31% of victims keep their abuse secret until early adulthood, and counsellors at Survivors UK, a charity for male abuse and rape victims, say most men they help are in their 30s or older. Part of the problem is a lack of information or resources available to male victims, as Georgina Hoare from Survivors UK explains: “Even when men do seek help from a counsellor, many tell us that they were asked to try elsewhere because that counsellor didn’t feel adequately trained to deal with the subject – which can put men off seeking proper help. More needs to be done to support these men – not just for their sake, but for society’s.”

For Katherine and Chris, the turning point came in March 2008, when Chris saw his abuser at a family party holding hands with a toddler. “I suddenly had a terrible fear that he could do it to someone else, and I knew I had to tell.”

One night, as they were going to bed, Chris finally blurted out what had happened. Katherine’s reaction was extreme. “Nothing prepares you for your partner saying that,” she recalls. “I ran to the toilet and was sick. But then I took a deep breath, went back into the bedroom and asked Chris what he wanted to do.”

Moving on

Chris took the brave decision to report Terry to the police, and to start seeing a counsellor. It was a positive move but their relationship continued to feel the strain. “When Chris came home from counselling, he’d be withdrawn and moody,” Katherine says. “I felt excluded from what he was going through. I knew he was suffering but I felt alone too.” In



“I told her about the abuse in an argument”

Michael*, 32, was abused by his father over a period of four years

“My father started abusing me when I was eight and it didn’t stop until my parents split up four years later. I tried to tell my mum once, but she didn’t want to know – I don’t think she could handle it. So instead of getting help, I clammed up.

“When I met Vicki* at uni, I hoped our relationship would help me overcome my childhood. We moved in together but, however close we got, I couldn’t tell her about the abuse. Slowly, things started to go wrong – I was moody and cold.

“Then one time we were arguing when I suddenly blurted out, ‘How can you treat me like this when I was raped as a child?’ After my outburst, we didn’t speak about it – it was like it had never happened.

“A year later, we broke up and I realised how much I needed help. I started counselling and confronted my father. He didn’t deny it, and I finally felt like I’d repaid him some of the pain he’d caused me.

“Now the abuse no longer dominates my life; and I won’t let what I’ve been through ruin another relationship.”

the end, joint counselling helped them move forward. “He realised he had to let me in,” says Katherine.

“I had to swallow my male pride,” Chris says. “I cried endlessly, and that was hard. I’d always been the supportive one before.”

In October 2009, Wheeler, now 66, was found guilty of nine counts of rape and sexual abuse, and sentenced to 13 years in prison. Having kept his secret for so long, Chris now copes by talking about it – advising police and Sexual Assault Referral Centres on how to deal with male victims. Meanwhile, Katherine and Chris are closer than ever. “Our relationship is a thousand times better,” she says. “Secrets like that should never stay buried.”

WHAT NOW?

Cosmo’s agony aunt Irma Kurtz has this advice if you discover your boyfriend has been abused:

Go at his pace When it comes to getting help or pressing charges against his attacker, he has to do it when he’s ready. Just be supportive.

Stay calm You may want to cry or get angry, but try to listen as calmly as you can. He’s revealing his most painful emotional secrets, so his feelings come first.

Accept change After his secret comes out, you might need to agree not to have sex for a while. Be patient and don’t take it personally.

Get help You’ll want to support him, but you have to protect yourself too. Speak to your GP or a support charity such as Survivors UK (www.survivorsuk.org; 0845 122 1201) or National Association for People Abused in Childhood (www.napac.org.uk; 0800 085 3330). ♦

BY ANDREINA CORDANI. PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY, GALLERYSTOCK. *NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED