

live

Breaking pattern of control hard for victims

QUESTION: I am losing my best friend. She has been married for about a year and ever since she got married she doesn't call me very often.

I think she is worried that her husband will get upset if we spend time together. And when they have come over for dinner with me and my husband, he says things that are very mean and embarrassing to her in front of us. Sometimes I even feel scared



of him. I don't know what is happening or what to do to

help her?
Answer:
 I know you have only given me a little bit of detail about what is happening with your friend and your friendship, but it sounds like she may be in an emotionally and verbally abusive relationship and your relationship with her is being impacted by it. This is hard for you and no doubt hard for her. It is an unfortunate fact that about one-third of all women in relationships are dealing with a partner who is emotionally and verbally abusive.

I think what might help you is to give you a very basic understanding of the dynamics of relationship abuse. This will help you understand the difficulty your friend faces in keeping a close relationship with you. Relationship abuse is really about one person (your friend's husband) needing to have power and control over another person (your friend) in order to feel good about himself. It's as if he is saying to his wife, "Well at least I am better than you." Typically, an abusive person will use the tactics of isolation, minimization, blaming, put-downs, threats, humiliation, mind games, and control of family income in order to maintain control over his

partner. In thinking about your question, I would imagine that your friend is hearing things like, "If you cared about me, you wouldn't want to spend time with her" or "She doesn't like me, and I know she wants us to break up." This puts a lot of pressure on her to side with him and distance herself from you. If she didn't, he might get very angry, withdrawn, and threaten to leave her. He makes her pay a price to maintain a relationship with you.

The other basic concept that might help you is that she is likely repeatedly experiencing something we call the cycle of violence. This is a pattern where his controlling behaviours escalate over

time, culminating in what we call the explosion phase, which often involves very intense emotional and verbal abuse, and potentially physical violence. It is usually after this explosion phase that a woman contemplates leaving the relationship. This is when your friend might reach out to you and tell you how terrible it all is for her. It is at this point that an abusive person realizes that he might actually lose his partner and tends to become exceedingly agreeable, will consent to couples counselling, and may even apologize for his bad behavior. This is a very effective tactic we call the honeymoon phase. Unfortunately,

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Former pair reconnects

Deborah Alden

Contributing Writer

WHEN 21-year-old Rigel Shaw moved back to the Lower Mainland from Penticton, he couldn't wait to get back into the familiar groove of West Coast life.

While playing volleyball at Ambleside Beach one weekend, he noticed a man skipping rocks with his son. Shaw says, "I was so distracted by this familiar face that I got hit in the head with the ball." Shaw realized it was Brian Bergot, his former Big Brother, whom he hadn't seen in eight years.

In honour of its 50th Anniversary, Big Brothers of Greater Vancouver is profiling stories of former Big and Little Brother pairs matched through its program. Bergot, a North Vancouver resident, contacted Big Brothers to share his story.

Bergot was a single 22-year-old in the early stages of a career with Methanex when he volunteered to spend a few hours a week as Big Brother to then 12-year-old Shaw. He decided to volunteer out of a desire to give back to the community and hoped he could make a difference in a young boy's life. He recalls his role in Shaw's life as, "Kind of a sounding board; a buddy with more life experience and someone he could go out and do 'guy' stuff with. We played just about any sport involving a ball or a puck." He jokingly adds, "I was a means of escape for him from an all-female environment."

Shaw says, "Brian was never there to fix me or tell me what to do. Just having him there, spending time with me made all the difference in the world. It let me know that I was going to be OK."

Recounting some of the more memorable moments with his Little Brother, Bergot remembers they attended a community sports day, for which the teenager sported a mohawk hairstyle and an outing to a restaurant for Shaw's 13th birthday, during which Shaw "awed" the waitresses by downing five pounds of hot chicken wings, followed by a monster mud pie dessert.

Shaw's mother, Sabine Shaw, says she applied for a Big Brother for him because his dad wasn't a big part of his life. Although Shaw had lots of positive male role models in his life through his involvement with hockey, she says, "They had their own families and time dedicated just to Rigel took time away from that. Rigel needed some guy time with someone who was into Rigel as a person, not Rigel the hockey player." She adds, "Rigel and I are very close, but sometimes a guy just needs to be around guys."

After spending only two years together, Shaw moved to Saskatchewan to accept a hockey scholarship at an academy renowned for its sports program, later moving to Penticton to play Junior A hockey. They lost touch and, says Bergot, "I never thought I would see him again, until we ran into each other that day on the beach.

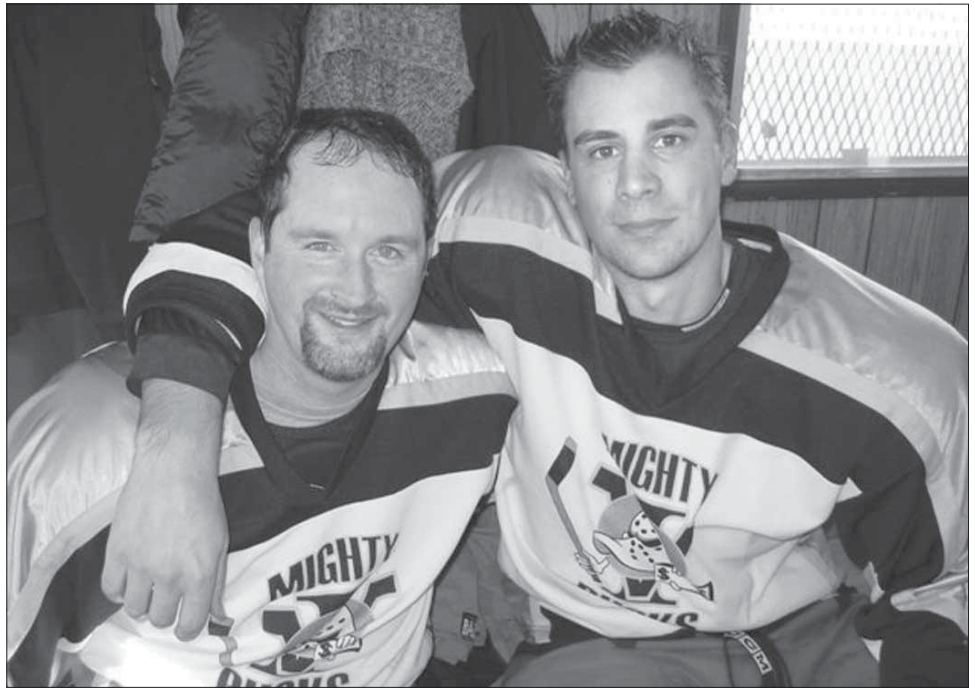


photo submitted

FORMER Big Brother Brian Bergot (left) and his not-so-little Little Brother Rigel Shaw competed in a local hockey tournament together last winter.

It was a pretty special moment when Rigel walked over to me, my wife Dawn and son Max and said hello." The friends scheduled a day to go out for a bite and ended up talking for hours. Shaw laughingly remembers that, "They kept wanting to bring us the cheque, but we were so caught up in talking to each other, we went through three different servers. The first two ended their shifts and went home."

Fifteen years after becoming a Big Brother, Bergot realizes what a tremendous impact the program had on him. "The idea of being someone's Big Brother grounded me and gave me a sense of responsibility. I learned a lot from Rigel and it helped me to appreciate how lucky I was to grow up with both my parents."

Shaw agrees that only now is he able to fully appreciate the positive influence Bergot had on him as a teenager. "The benefits of our time together are showing up in my life more and more," he says.

It's been six years since the men resumed their friendship and much has changed for both. Bergot manages the investor relations activities for Taseko Mines and he and his wife now have two sons,

ages eight and three. Shaw attended the University in Ohio on a full athletic scholarship and has recently moved to Barbados to work for Carrera Marketing as a project management consultant.

Despite the distance between them, Bergot says, "Rigel is one of my closest friends. I talk to him almost every day on Instant Messenger." He jokes, "We discuss relationships, work or how we would better manage the Canucks." He adds that when Shaw is in town they still do a lot of things they used to do except, "Now instead of having deep discussions over milkshakes, it's over beers."

Shaw feels that he and Bergot are like brothers and says, "I couldn't imagine my life without Brian. Getting to see him now as a husband and father with a successful career and having him welcome me into his family is a gift I don't know if I will ever be able to repay."

Big Brothers of Greater Vancouver is looking for more Big Brothers over the age of 19 to spend a few hours a week with youth on the North Shore. For more information, call 604-876-2447, ext. 246 or visit bigbrothersvancouver.com.

Be ready to listen when abused friends choose to open up

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because these changes are not real, but rather designed to maintain long-term control within the relationship, the old pattern of controlling behaviours quickly returns and the feeling of walking on eggshells begins anew.

So what can you do? I would suggest that you do some further reading about relationship abuse (also called domestic violence). I would suggest a book by Patricia Evans called Verbally Abusive Relationship. You can also

search online for information — just use Google and type in "domestic violence." I think the best thing you can do directly for your friend is to just be there to listen when she is ready to talk. Let her know you support her but you are not OK with how she is being treated by her husband and that she is not responsible for his behavior.

Try not to judge her because she is just doing the best she can right now. Telling her to leave him won't help and it is important to

note that the most dangerous time for a woman is when she leaves the relationship and breaks the pattern of control. You don't want to feel responsible if anything happened to her and that advice really never helps anyway.

If you feel that she can hear it, let her know that

counselling is available. Our agency has a free program for women impacted by abuse. Simply give her our number or web address and let her take it from there. She will make the call when she is ready.

Julia Staub-French, M.A., R.C.C., director of clinical programs at Family

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