



## Witness statement of James Collins

I, James Collins,<sup>1</sup> say as follows:

1. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

### Background

2. I grew up in a country town where the ideal of a man was someone macho, gruff, strong and silent. You had to be a drinker, you had to be one of the boys. I always put on a persona of being a tough guy. I am a big guy so it was easy to carry on this bluff. But underneath, I was a wimp.
3. I was quite isolated when I was a kid. My family was quite remote and my brother and sister and I were often left at home by ourselves. I was always a bit of a bully. There were a few times when I got called out on my behaviour. The guys at school would do the freeze out thing. They would cut me out and make me think about my behaviour for a little while, but I would always go back to what I was doing before. I was always alone, as a kid. It was the way I went through life.
4. The ultimatum to change my behaviour or leave came from my wife about five years ago. My wife and I had been married for about 15 years at this point. Throughout our entire marriage I had been psychologically abusive, manipulative and underhanded. I would be threatening and intimidating towards my wife and my family, yelling and screaming and punching walls. I kept my wife off balance all the time. I would hide things from her.
5. Around five years ago, my wife got to a point where she wasn't willing to put up with it any longer. As they were growing up, our kids, both boys, had started to mimic my behaviour and disrespect her. They would take my side on things. She was becoming isolated in our own home. She told me that I had to do something about my behaviour, or our marriage was over.
6. It was crunch time. It really made me think—I purport to be a father and a husband and to love my family. But what is the real truth?

### Getting in touch with services

7. My wife had a friend who worked for Men's Referral Service. She contacted him and he agreed that what I was doing was abusive. He gave her some details which she passed onto me. I called Men's Referral Service, who referred me to an organisation called Kildonan UnitingCare (Kildonan). I rang Kildonan but they didn't have any openings in any of their programs for three months. It was coming up to Christmas time and all the programs were finishing up for the year.
8. While I was waiting to start one of the programs at Kildonan, I was trying to improve my behaviour myself. I was buying books so I could read up on passive aggression

<sup>1</sup> The name and other details of the witness referred to in this statement have been changed to protect his identity and to comply with the Royal Commission into Family Violence Restricted Publication Order dated 24 July 2015.

and those kind of issues. I read a couple of different books and these were consistent with what I saw myself as doing. In the meantime, I was going through a cycle of violence and remorse. I couldn't identify this pattern of behaviour at the time, but I later realised what I had been doing.

9. In February, I had four weeks of one-on-one sessions at Kildonan with one of the counsellors. I started to feel changes in myself at that stage, from talking to someone and receiving feedback on what I was saying.
10. Then I had the opportunity to start participating in some of the programs Kildonan offered.

## **Men's behavioural change programs**

11. The first program I participated in was a Men's Behavioural Change program. This initially ran for eight weeks but was extended to 12 weeks. Within the broader Men's Behavioural Change program, I did several other programs including programs relating specifically to parenting. Overall, I participated in about four programs over a 12 month period. I refer to these programs collectively as MBC programs.
12. The MBC programs helped me to understand my own behaviour. I realised throughout the program that anxiety and depression had a big impact on my behaviour and my reactions to situations. I was able to recognise that my main issue was that, when people raised an issue with me, I thought they were having a go at me. Previously I used to feel very anxious when my wife would raise issues with me. It might be issues with the house, or with me or things I had done. I felt confronted, like I was being called out on it.
13. I got really defensive and anxious and I felt like I was being attacked. My response to the increased anxiety was to deny the issue, fight and get out. That would result in me becoming aggressive, angry and threatening in my behaviour. I would yell and scream and stomp around.
14. The MBC programs helped me to reflect on my behaviour and showed me how damaging that kind of behaviour was. The MBC programs made me realise I'm not the only person in the world with this problem. I was educated about the typical cycle of violence. This was mind blowing. We also did role playing. I put myself in my wife's position, which was a real eye-opener. I understood what she was going through, to a degree. I felt much more compassion for my wife after that.
15. The MBC programs also taught me techniques to deal with that depression and anxiety. One of the techniques that was suggested is to look out the window and breathe. I took up meditation which helped with recognising how to breathe and keep control.
16. I also learned to persevere in conversations where previously I would have become very anxious and exploded and left. On one occasion, I decided to sit through a whole conversation with my wife where we were discussing an issue. I forced myself to sit through it, despite the anxiety I was feeling. That was terrifying, sitting there talking to my wife. The first time I felt like my heart was going to stop. But I got through it—I didn't stomp off or yell and scream. I listened to my wife and I thought to myself, 'I'm not dead.' It was a breakthrough. Once I broke through that fear, it got better and better. We talk openly all the time now.
17. It was a mind-blowing experience for me. It helped me to see what was truly happening and gave me ways to stop falling back into the patterns of my old

behaviour. If I'm not feeling right, I will lie in bed and go through where my mind is at and where I felt my best during the day and where I am struggling.

18. I am not as angry as I used to be. I am not abusive anymore, I don't yell and scream and intimidate my wife and family. I can calmly go through discussions instead of getting upset and stomping around and being a bully.
19. The MBC programs turned around the way I thought. The changes I experienced I will carry for the rest of my life; I have had a complete turnaround in the last five or six years. It is a wonderful gift to be given. My relationship with my wife is the best it has ever been, since our first year of marriage. My relationship with my boys has also improved dramatically. I can give them a hug now. We are a much warmer and closer family.

## **My perspective on MBC programs**

### **Voluntary versus non-voluntary involvement**

20. When I started doing the MBC programs, I was really motivated to change. Before I started, I had decided I was going to do something about myself and my behaviour. I didn't want to lose everything I had. I went in there the first day with the intention of being honest and open with what my experiences were and what I saw myself as being.
21. I don't know how effective the programs are when men are there involuntarily. Of the 12 men I started the first MBC program with, there were only four that were doing the program voluntarily. Once the guys had done the minimum that was required of them by the court, most of them disappeared and didn't stay involved any further. There was only one man (of those that were not there voluntarily) who continued involvement with the services after his court-ordered program finished. He started going to a support group.
22. If men are there because they are forced to be there, I'm not sure how they can confront the issues and start dealing with them and making changes. I was motivated compared with most men and I noted a big difference between my experience and those of men who were there involuntarily. A lot of them seemed to view themselves as victims. I think one key thing was that in order to change they needed to see themselves for who they truly are—the perpetrator, not the victim.

### **Support offered to women and children**

23. Kildonan was very proactive about offering support to my wife and children as well. My wife attended a support group along the way that was for women whose partners were doing the MBC programs. I think these groups, and this support, is really important.

### **Increased demand**

24. I understand that it is currently not possible, or at least it is very difficult, to voluntarily attend an MBC program. There is so much demand coming from court-ordered attendees that those who would voluntarily attend can't get a spot.
25. I think this is a real shame. Given how helpful the MBC programs were for me, I think there should be opportunities to participate for men who identify in themselves a need for change, as well as those who are ordered to do so by the court.

## Ongoing supports

26. I am now part of a men's group, through my interfaith church community, that meets monthly. The men in the group are all older than me. It is good to hear the maturity and common sense that these men have by virtue of being older than me. They will listen and give feedback on what I have to say. We do working bees and other activities together.
27. I have had some treatment for my depression, but nothing ongoing. I am not on any medication at the moment. I also attend meditation sessions through my church.
28. About 12 months after I completed the MBC programs I got in touch with Men's Referral Service and No to Violence to see what other avenues were available to give something back. I started doing phone counselling but I had to stop in the end; I couldn't deal with it because it brought back too many memories. But I still touch base with these sorts of services occasionally. If I feel things aren't right, I will ring up and have a chat and get back on track. This sort of thing is not a fast process; you take three steps forward then a step back.
29. I think having had a mentor or someone I could talk to and be appreciated by would have made a big difference. There are people I meet now that I wish I had known 30 or 40 years ago. It might have made a big difference to my life.

## The impact on my children

30. My two boys are 23 and 21. They are very aware of what I've done. I think it is important to talk about it, given what I've been through and what can happen. If their behaviour is not up to scratch then I help them make changes and be there with them. I am trying to help them as much as I can. I am trying to lead by example as to what can be done and what the outcomes can be.
31. My sons are lucky though. My sons have lots of friends who are both girls and boys. When I was growing up, the boys only spent time with the boys and you basically didn't talk to girls. I think this is important to have relationships with the opposite sex from a young age.

## Message to other men

32. My message to other men in this situation would be that no matter what, you can still make a difference. Things aren't lost. Even if the relationship is gone, you can still be better than what you are. However, you have to be open to it and willing to be raw and honest and face some hard truths.

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