

The Neighbourhood Watch Podcast Episode 3 with Ruth Dodsworth

Hello, welcome to the Neighbourhood Watch podcast with me, Alfie Moore. The mission at Neighbourhood Watch is to support and enable people to be connected, active and safe so that communities can become more neighbourly places to live. The team here thought, what connects a human race better than a podcast? And so they asked me to be involved.

Of course, I am delighted. I used to be a police officer, then had a bit of a career pivot, and now I do stand-up comedy. There are similarities.

Both receive a great deal of real-time feedback. Some positive, some not so much. You might have heard of my Radio 4 series, It's a Fair Cop, or maybe you've come along to one of my live shows.

In this series, I'll be chatting to some familiar faces about the neighbourhood where they grew up and their experiences, or the experience of people close to them as victims of crime. During that conversation, we'll be joined by a police officer or an expert in the field who'll provide advice and key information. Should you find yourself or know someone who's going through a similar experience.

My guest today is Ruth Dodsworth, a broadcaster, journalist and weather presenter whose credits include ITV, ITN, Good Morning Britain and Coast and Country. Ruth has publicly shared her experiences as a survivor of coercive control and domestic abuse by her former husband. She's been rebuilding her life since 2021 when her ex-husband was jailed.

She's now a campaigner working with domestic abuse charities and police forces. If I had gone home that night, there is absolutely no doubt I wouldn't be here. I just wouldn't be here now.

I had nowhere to go. And I suddenly found myself in this really strange world where the previous 20 years of my life, my existence suddenly were exposed as a complete sham. I didn't know what to do.

I didn't know who to ask for help. And it's very difficult to explain. And I still don't know quite how I got through that.

Ruth was awarded an OBE in 2025 for services to domestic abuse survivors. And I'm delighted to welcome her to the Neighbourhood Watch podcast. Hello, Ruth.

Hello, how are you? I'm good. Thank you for coming on the show. It's really appreciated.

You were born in Worthing in West Sussex. Can you tell us a little bit about the neighbourhood where you grew up? Well, I'm one of those people who had a sort of a childhood that was spent following my parents and their various careers around. So I was technically born in Worthing in Sussex.

But as my mum always says, we were just passing through. My mum is Welsh. And if you've got relatives anywhere who are Welsh, they will literally stake that claim to that nationality.

So my mum is from Mumbles and my dad's from Sheffield. So proper northerner. Oh, I'm a Sheffield lad.

I'm a Sheffield lad. So they were just passing through Worthing. But my childhood really was spent growing up in the most incredible part of Wales, known as Gower.

I think in a way I can only describe it as absolutely 70s idyllic. It was fabulous. It was proper 1970s sort of housing estate.

You know, you'd go out. And as long as you were home in time for tea, your mum and dad didn't really mind. It was just kind of I don't know whether it was... Risk assessments weren't really effective for kids.

We'd never heard of those. You know, you went off on your bike, you were on your rollerblades. And that was it.

You know, you had a great time. You were climbing trees. We were doing all sorts.

You say housing estate, but was it rural? The best way to describe it was a very busy 1970s housing estate in the middle of a very sort of rural area and very close to the beach as well. So I mean, I'm literally, if I was working for Wales Tourism, I'd be earning a fortune now. But it was it was just it was all very young, very innocent, very lovely.

Just sort of a bygone age, I think. It's amazing how we would spend all those years as a child. Wanted to be a grown up.

But as soon as you are thinking, well, maybe it wasn't that bad. Yes, if I could turn back the clock. Certainly, certainly from a skin point of view.

So do you remember any of your neighbours? Were there any sort of characters or quirky characters or anybody that springs to mind? It was if you can imagine, we sort of lived in a cul-de-sac of bungalows and at the top of the sort of the top of the cul-de-sac, it was on a bit of a hill, which, as I say, if you had roller boots, it was brilliant. I left half my knees on those those pavements. Then back in the 70s, but the top of the sort of the cul-de-sac was sort of posh houses.

And the further down the cul-de-sac you go, we were put it this way. We were at the bottom. So and there was always wasn't there the one house that sort of was slightly had the sort of the the elderly lady.

And I'm saying this with most respect that we were all slightly terrified of because you know what Chinese whispers was like back in the day? And it was a bit like that scene from what was that film Home Alone, where the old chap and the theory was that he bumped off his family and that they were, you know, it was that sort of thing. So we were always kind of a bit scared of that house. And we'd go very quickly past it.

But we I just remember was sort of a neighbourhood where everyone looked out for everyone else. I was very lucky that we know we were all the same sort of age. There was a proper gang or gaggle of us kids.

And, you know, the neighbours, again, our parents were all the same sort of ages. So everyone got on with everyone. And, you know, in terms of specific characters, so obviously you have the frightening old lady at the top of the hill.

And then we were kind of everyone at the bottom of the hill, just sort of put on. And it may be that I'm sort of looking at it through, you know, nostalgia and rose tinted glasses. I just remember it as just being a really, really, really happy time.

This is the Neighbourhood Watch podcast with me, Alfie Moore. And my guest in this episode is Ruth Dodsworth, the journalist, broadcaster and weather presenter. And so we'll be joined by our expert guest, Naomi Smith, who's CEO from Her Centre's charity.

So, Ruth, we're now in the part of the podcast where we chat about your experiences as a victim of crime. For you, this took place over a sustained period. It was very close to home.

In fact, it was your home. The perpetrator was your former husband. How long had you known him? Well, I suppose I was a classic case of, you know, I was early 20s.

I had a lovely job. I had my own little home. Life was going really beautifully, but I was single.

And I was dispatched by my company. I worked for a television company at this point to go and film a series about people having different nights out. And one particular episode involved going down to Swansea to film what was then a very famous, well-known nightclub and to interview the so-called larger than life character who ran and owned this club, which, of course, I did.

And like so many, you know, single 20 somethings fell head over heels with this chap who swept me off my feet, treated me like I was, you know, the centre of the world, absolute princess. And within a year of meeting him, we were married. So, you know, it was all very, very quick, very fantastic, very exciting.

But it didn't quite pan out like that in the end. So what happened next then? It's interesting because I often get asked, Alfie, if were the signs. At what point do you realise that he wasn't quite as he as he sort of said he was? He wasn't quite this sort of fabulous character.

And I think really from day one, the very first day I met him, hindsight is an incredible thing, isn't it? The very first day I met him, I remember he was having a phone conversation with his mum and he started screaming and shouting at her and swearing. And I just thought, oh, gosh, actually, this is a little bit woe. But, you know, he was in a sort of pressured job and it was a family business.

So he sort of explained it away. And, you know, I kind of got it, but he did that quite a lot. And, you know, I witnessed it towards other people, but not in the early days.

It wasn't directed to myself. So in the early days, you know, it was all very exciting. He was a little bit jealous, a little bit possessive.

But again, you know, that was in a strange way. And I'm sure you've heard this before. That was actually quite it was quite flattering.

It was, oh, gosh, you must you must really love me. You know, we got married within a year. At first, first child was born a year later.

So it all happened very, very fast. But I would say that it's easy to say where the red flags there. Of course they were from day one.

But when you're in the throes of a new relationship, you're just married, baby on the way, you want that relationship to work and you will do anything to make it work. You know, I also had quite a public job. So people knew, you know, knew me.

The last thing I wanted was for that relationship to not work. So, you know, the screaming and shouting at his other family members, you just sort of brush it aside. But I guess that the sad thing is that the life that I thought I had at that point wasn't the life that I ended up living.

And it was very difficult, I think, to sort of pinpoint the point at which it changed, at which the sort of the line got crossed. And, you know, the excitement, the jealousy, the possessiveness, the I don't want you talking to these people. I don't want you talking to this man in particular, started to become something slightly more sinister.

And over the years, I started to lose contact with my lovely social circle. I started to lose contact with my family, started to become more isolated. And I didn't realise what was going on.

And I think that's part of it. It's it's a very confusing thing. Yeah.

Do you know, at one point I worked with some domestic abuse victims in the police, and especially Celia and that isolation theme. Yeah. Yeah.

What about work wise? Did that carry on after you had kids, get back to work? Yeah. So I went back to work and, you know, I'm talking about a time frame. I was with this guy for nearly 20 years.

So, you know, met, married kids very, very early on in the relationship within the first probably four or five years. Red flags were there really from day one. But I sort of forgave them.

It was only sort of, you know, as the kids started, as toddlers started to grow up, that it sort of tipped from being, I would say, not just sort of verbal, but to something slightly more. Again, I use the word sinister, but sort of it became a bit more physical. And I think, you know, I went back to work quite quickly because I need more than anything.

I wanted to get out of the house. I needed to go back to colleagues, to friends, to sort of that little bit of normality. And, you know, like everyone else, so many people like myself,

you paint your face on, you get yourself to work, you pretend that everything is absolutely fabulous.

You're living this lovely life. And so I suppose that the deceit, the deception begins. And that very much continued over the years, you know.

Was there a point when you thought, no, this is I need to do something about this? Well, and here's the thing. I loved this man. He was the father of my two children.

His behaviour was getting progressively worse over the years. Colleagues were starting to notice sort of changes in my behaviour. I didn't have my phone.

He would take my phone. You know, if they rang me, he would he would answer. I wasn't allowed to sort of go out with him at lunchtime if I had to leave work as soon as work finished.

Part of my job is that I go to different locations. I meet different people. I had to show him where I was, where I was going face to face.

Oh, I mean, that that really is now. Yeah. Serious.

That is a serious coercive control at that point, isn't it? He would he would turn up at work just to check I was there. He would. I mean, this is in the days before sort of, you know, trackers and so on.

But yeah, he would he would check my phone. I mean, again, you know, you might be listening to this thinking, well, gosh, this is all happening. It's the backdrop of a profession.

You know, you're a working woman, professional. It's so and I use this word insidious. It just creeps up on you.

Don't realise that it's happening to you. Don't realise that, you know, colleagues are starting to question why. And I never socialise with them.

Why? You know, I come in in the mornings and I look upset. I'm a bit tired or start to be a bit withdrawn. Not my usual bubbly self.

I think it was probably difficult for my colleagues because they were able to see that things in me were changing. But, you know, again, I wasn't ready to admit to myself, let alone to the outside world, that things at home were not good. And so, you know, to go back to your question, at what point did you, you know, did that line cross? Did I realise? I think I knew almost straight away.

I just didn't know how to get out of it or what to do or who to ask. But because of that, you know, it very nearly cost me my life. And there was some of the headlines when my story broke where mum don't don't come home.

He's going to kill you. And actually, as sensational as that sounds, that that was the case. So that's a message from one of you.

My children. Yeah. Who who? October 2019.

And I will never forget it because I'm in a very long story short. My my Narek's husband was a drinker. I would leave him go to work.

And, you know, unbeknownst to me, he was drinking heavily, really. From the moment I left him. I think I suspect when I was told drug taking, too.

But I, you know, naively didn't really see it. And one particular day in this October 2019, he I'd obviously gone to work. Nothing had caused it.

There was no, you know, no argument. But in the course of what would happen was the minute I left work, he would ring me just to make sure I was going to work. And I think I was upset that morning.

So I didn't answer his call. And of course, he just read out. So by the time I left from leaving home to getting to work, I think he'd phone me over 200 and something other times got to work.

And I was upset and I didn't want to speak to him. People will say to you, why didn't you answer? Because I just didn't. I couldn't.

I was upset and he just wouldn't wouldn't leave me alone. And so he was drinking all day. The phone calls were getting more and more erratic, nastier during the course of the day while still trying to work, obviously.

And then, you know, my children, who were young teenagers at the time, had come home from school and obviously realised that he was in this state. And they basically by about tea time, my last studio appearance was twenty past six that evening. And I was doing that against the backdrop of knowing that he'd phone me hundreds of times, was drinking.

And yeah, my kids basically. And that's tough. I mean, that's to try being normal is almost an act.

It must be. Yeah. And I think the point at which my two children said to me, Mom, do not come home is he will kill you.

They meant it. They absolutely meant it. And if I had gone home that night, there is absolutely no doubt I wouldn't be here.

I just wouldn't be here now. And what did he do? I phoned the police. I knew that my children were safe because they were able to go to my mom and dad.

And, you know, he'd he'd never been physically abusive towards them mentally, manipulatively. Yes, but not physically. So I knew they were in any immediate danger.

So they went to my mom and dad's. I basically stayed in work. A friend who I who I told about this basically came to see me and said, look, this is ridiculous.

You cannot go home. And by the early hours of the following morning, he basically said to me, if you do not bring the police now, I will. So it almost took someone else forcing my hand sort of to make me make that 999 call.

I mean, I'm you know, I've I've never never phoned 999 before. I'm someone who was sort of brought up with a very healthy respect for and slight fear of police. And, you know, so for someone like me to to actually make that call.

What did things happen quickly after that point? Yeah. I mean, you know, there I was obviously very visibly upset, you know, upset on the phone. And I will always say, you know, hats off to South Wales Police, who I would say, you know, I made the call at about eight o'clock on the Friday morning.

By about nine o'clock on the Friday morning, my now ex-husband was being arrested at our at our house. Two young male police officers who got to the house. And, you know, I didn't know what I was ringing them for.

All I knew is that I needed to get into the house to make sure that, you know, my kids had school uniforms so they could go to school so that I could get clothes because, you know, I was still in the clothes I'd gone to work in the day before. I hadn't planned or realised that I was never going to go home again. So I needed to get, you know, I needed to have a shower, to brush my teeth, get some clothes.

But I obviously couldn't do that whilst he was there. He was still 24 hours on being agitated. So the police came to the house, could see what was going on.

And, you know, I will always say thank goodness for those two officers who read the room, read the situation. It wasn't your typical crime scene. They could have just dismissed it as a bit of an argument between, you know, a married couple, but they didn't.

Well, if you if you've got a hundred and odd texts on your phone. Yeah. For that day.

I mean, that is serious stalking. And, you know, that was that was just the tip of the iceberg. You know, there was far worse, the things he was saying to me.

But that that was the real turning point. I think, you know, when your children say to you that their dad, your husband is going to kill you, there's no turning back from that. So he's now in custody.

He's now in custody. What happened next? My life at that point is an absolute blur because here I was sort of early 40s. My two children were staying at my parents.

I was advised not to go back to the house for my own safety because obviously he knew where I was. So he remained in the family home and you all moved out. He he he basically was taken to custody whilst he was in custody.

I then became aware that he had effectively lost the family home through various financial decisions and sort of deals that he'd done. So all of a sudden, the tsunami of my husband's in custody. I've been told not to go back to the house.

It looks as if the house is about to be taken away anyway. I had no money. No one really in the outside world knew what on earth had been going on.

So all of a sudden I had to make you know, I had to find myself asking people for help. I was homeless. I didn't qualify.

You know, refuge wasn't sort of an option at the time because I was I was earning salary and couldn't afford that sort of refuge. I had nowhere to go. And I suddenly found myself in this really strange world where the previous 20 years of my life, my existence suddenly were exposed as a complete sham.

I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to ask for help. And it's very difficult to explain.

And I still don't know quite how I got through that. But somehow I did. And, you know, with the help and absolute kindness of friends and family who suddenly welcomed me back with open arms, suddenly realised that, you know, things in my home had been bad.

I suddenly had to pull my heart out and reveal to all these people that life as I knew it, life as they thought I was living, it was just a complete sham. And I had to almost overnight start again. And that was difficult.

Thank heavens for the good friends and good family. So many people don't have that. My hand was forced, effectively.

First of all, I had to ring 999. I had to leave home. I mean, when I say I had nothing, I didn't even have a bank account because he'd taken out loans and so on in my name, credit cards and so on that I knew nothing about.

So suddenly to discover that you have not a penny in the bank, your credit rating is absolutely destroyed. To then start to rebuild your life when you're, you know, in that situation is nigh an embarrassment. Devastating.

After a lifetime of hard work and studying and building a family, just gone. All gone. Almost overnight.

I'd just like to bring in our expert guest at this point, Ruth, which is Naomi Smith, CEO from Her Centre. Tell us, tell us about your charity. So Her Centre, we're based in Greenwich and we cover the entire borough and we're the high risk service.

So any cases in the borough where there's risk homicide, where there's children in the home, where there's sexual violence or where the abuse is ramping up. So it seems that there could be more incidents coming and they get referred to us. And we work in a casework, one to one, completely consent based.

It's always the survivor's choice to engage with us. And then we have our lovely IDVAS, who are qualified domestic abuse specialists who help them either get to safety or if they're choosing to stay, which sometimes they do, to do that in the safest way as possible for now. And then afterwards, we had lots of work, lots of training, lots of legal advice to kind of help with the rebuilding of a life once that safety is secured.

So listening to Ruth's very shocking story, does that resonate with some of your work? Absolutely. Sadly, it was so familiar. You know, there's points there where you're starting to say a sentence.

And I think I know how this ends because it happens so, so often. I think what's really amazing, Ruth, is you sharing your feelings early on just to be able to say, you know, I did enjoy it at the beginning. So many women take that and think, well, it's my fault.

So to hear you as like someone on the other side of it, as someone with the confidence to be on TV, to say, yeah, this is what happened and this is what I felt, I think will really, really impact people. Support wise, Ruth, you mentioned the police were very good. Were you aware of IDVA or was there any other similar support for yourself? So here's the thing, and Naomi, you'll probably understand this.

I'm talking about sort of six. I'll be coming up to seven years ago when this all this fateful night, as they call it, when he was arrested. So back in those days, you know, this is this is relatively recent.

Seven years ago, we weren't really talking about domestic abuse. I didn't really know. In fact, I don't think I've really heard about coercive control, this phrase that all of a sudden the police were sort of throwing at me.

And I kid you not, they effectively gave me a sort of what I now call as like an idiot's guide to domestic abuse and coercive control. And I think it was at that point I must have that sort of eureka moment where I was reading this booklet once he'd been arrested. And it was like, oh, my gosh, that's him.

That's him. That's him. He ticked every single box.

And it was from, you know, from the possessiveness, the jealousy, the controlling behaviour, the financial control, the physical abuse, the threats, the violence. He ticked every single box. And at that point, I realised that I had been in an abusive relationship.

And I was living with what you would term domestic abuse. But when you're in that moment where suddenly you're having to make police statements and witness statements and having to admit to people and tell people about some of the most degrading moments in your life and you're tired and you just want to make sure your kids are OK and you just want a cup of tea. In that moment, it was almost like a tsunami of, well, there's this number you can ring.

There's this website you can you can log on to. And in that very moment, those initial days, those early days all I wanted to do was just curl up into a ball and shut the world out. I didn't want to keep having the same conversations about, you know, what what he'd done to me or what I'd lost or how bad it was.

So, you know, idfas were offered in the early stages, but I turned it all down because I didn't want to have to tell my story to anyone else. And I've sort of always said, Nima, I don't know if you find this with people who come to you, is that, you know, in those initial stages where you're firing on adrenaline and I don't think you really know or are able to process what

what on earth is going on. And then suddenly you get caught up in this big machine of sort of police and interviews and legals and sort of court cases.

I would say that help from people like Naomi is as valuable now as it is or would have been right back in those early days. And I, you know, I'm never one to criticise the system. But if there was anything I would say is that the help and the ongoing support would be and is more valuable almost now than almost in those early confusing stages.

Well, one thing I asked that I found surprising and I'll ask Naomi about this is that the perpetrator stayed in the family unit and kids and mom had to go away. Is that is that typical, Naomi? Sadly, yes. We still say one of the worst things about the system is it's still the survivor that's moved to to safety and the perpetrator often gets to stay.

Yes. When it's refuge referrals, that gets really, really tricky because there's things like you can't bring your family dog. So people stay because they don't leave the dog in the home.

Or if you have a son over 14, he can't come because they're not allowed in the women's refuges. Or if you have a mortgage, can't go to a refuge. So it's all things like that.

So the survivor needs to leave. But then there's so many barriers if they don't. Naomi, you absolutely summed it up.

It took about a thousand reasons to stay. You've just literally just summed up that it is almost impossible to get out for so many people. It must be so frustrating when people say, why didn't you just leave? It must be so such a frustrating question because I couldn't.

It's not that simple. I just know that's. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

That's your whole life there, isn't it? Yeah. Why don't you just walk out on your whole life? 20 years of marriage, two kids. Well, what a brave thing to do when you did.

And one of the things I suppose I've struggled with, and I mean, again, I'm sure that this is common, is that for a very long time, I felt, you know, in ringing the police and asking for help, that I'd done this to the family. I'd got him arrested. I then sent him to prison.

I, for a long, long time, felt that I was the guilty one and I was doing all of this to him. And actually, it was only through support of people like, you know, me. And they said, oh, no, no, you've not done this to him.

He's done this to himself. And I suppose, you know, it's that victim kind of this was my husband. This was a man I loved for 20 years.

So so many reasons not to leave that that that relationship, that marriage. But I mean, all I can say is I'm very glad and very lucky that I did. Yeah, because it's also the father of your children, right? You know, absolutely.

They they don't want to ruin the relationship between the father and the children. They still want to maintain that no matter what's happening. Well, going back to this idyllic childhood that we were talking about, Alfie, you know, my upbringing.

No one in my family's ever got divorced before. And even things like that, you start thinking, oh, they're all going to hate me because I'm going to be the black sheep. Bringing shame, bringing shame on the family.

Absolutely. Yeah. Just just to clarify, because coercive control is one of those phrases that, as you identify, Ruth, has become really sort of popular in the last few years, but it's really difficult to define.

So I'm just going to quote section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2017, which describes it as a pattern of controlling or coercive behaviour that has a serious effect on the victim. And the perpetrator ought to know that their behaviour will have that serious effect. So it's still a bit woolly, I guess.

But people historically have thought about domestic violence and other forms of abuse. But there's a lot more forms of abuse in coercive control now, isn't there? It's not just emotional. Yeah.

And we've generally changed from saying domestic violence to domestic abuse because as we learn more and we understood that sometimes there's no violence. And that can be really difficult if the perpetrator has never laid a hand on the survivor, but has done, you know, economic abuse, coercive control and been tracking them, been stalking. All of that can be just as damaging.

But it's so much harder to then come forward and say, I think that this is wrong and I don't think this should be happening to me. So moving your story on, Ruth, was he charged quite quickly or was there an evidence gathering period? Yeah, I mean, this was given that this was back in twenty nine. So of course, the Covid years kicked in.

So from the day that he was arrested, I think it was twenty twenty one. So it was a year and a half. He was he was arrested in October.

There were five charges that were put to him in the January. And then obviously the trial was slated for the September. So October to January before he was charged.