

# It's likely we all know an abused woman like Celeste

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If you think the storyline of *Big Little Lies* battered society wife Celeste Wright is far-fetched, think again.

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The HBO hit drama, which returns to Foxtel tonight (JUNE 10) and stars Nicole Kidman as abused housewife, Celeste, might be set in fictional Monterey but the central theme of secret domestic violence is very real.

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Sadistic abuse of women by their husbands and partners “knows no postcode” and is occurring, behind closed doors, across all sections of Australian society, say police and domestic violence support services.

It's likely that among mums at the school gate at pick-up time, or watching the kids play sport on Saturdays, are women who have been at one time in their lives — or still are — abused by a husband or partner.

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A fan of the first series of *Big Little Lies*, it disturbed me greatly to think I might not know if someone in my social network was being physically abused at home.

How would I tell? And if I did suspect abuse, what would or could I do?



 Looking at Celeste Wright, played by Nicole Kidman, it's hard to tell she suffers at the hands of her husband. Picture: Jennifer Clasen/HBO.

Primary therapist at Sydney's exclusive The Cabin, Xanthe Katsouras, who counsels abused women from Sydney's North Shore and eastern suburbs, says victims can be extremely adept at concealing their injuries, both physical and psychological, often making it hard for friends to detect.

In fact, highly-educated women from upper-middle class suburbs could be among the most reluctant to reveal abuse to family and friends and seek help, she said.

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A deep, misplaced, sense of shame "and even of embarrassment" that they had found themselves living in an abusive relationship which they knew was unacceptable, could be a major barrier to seeking help.

The backgrounds of many of the women she counselled was not unlike that of Celeste Wright in Big Little Lies, Ms Katsouras said.

The mother of twin boys, immaculately groomed and dressed, Celeste has a law degree and lives in an expensive home in a beautiful location with her rich banker husband, Perry, a chameleon who is slick and mannered in public but a controlling, manipulative brute in private.



Bruises are hidden underneath Celeste's designer clothes. Picture: Big Little Lies/GBO

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Celeste's bruises are expertly covered with designer polo-necks, scarfs and long sleeves, pants and skirts, and to the outside world the pair's relationship appears ideal.

"That character is actually our demographic," Ms Katsouras said. "Even if the wife is no longer working and has instead become the main caregiver for the children, she will often have a history of having been quite highly-educated.

"It is not the complete answer by any means, but maybe part of the reason you end up getting a lot of hiding (of abuse) in this demographic is because of the shame. (The woman saying to herself) 'you know, I'm really intelligent and here I am being subjected to, and putting up with, this'. But a lot of the time in these kind of situations, what I've observed, is the abuse doesn't start off with a gong and a bell, it happens a lot of the time quite slowly, over a long period, and there's a lot of forms of subtle abuse, emotional abuse, withholding, gaslighting, all that sort of stuff feeding into it."

The first season, based on Liane Moriarty's 2014 best selling novel, sees Perry Wright's deviant sexual desires, emotional manipulation and violent rages escalate over time, to a point where Celeste fears for her life in one of his relentless, secret bashings, which occurs with the children in the house.

New South Wales Police Assistant Commissioner and family violence spokesperson, Mark Jones, said domestic violence was "extremely prevalent" across the state, with police responding to about 120,000 calls for help per year, or 350 a day.

By far the majority of calls for help were from women, being abused by their male partners, and the abuse ranged from extremely violent physical assaults to harassment and intimidation, stalking and other abusive and controlling behaviours, he said.



Celeste in a confronting scene with her husband Perry, played by Alexander Skarsgard. Picture: Big Little Lies/GBO

The calls came from women across all socio-economic groups.

"The numbers are huge. Domestic and family violence is not dictated by postcodes. We see it right across all parts of society — all demographics," Mr Jones said.

Victoria Police Assistant Commissioner Dean McWhirter said, sadly, many women were living with a level of fear and violence in their relationships.

And tragically they were far more likely to experience violence — both physical and sexual — from a family member or someone they knew in their own home, than a stranger or someone they had just met.

Ms Katsouras said one of the most common reasons women decided to finally seek help and leave their husband or partner was when the abuse started to impact on their ability to care for their children, or they feared their children could also be at risk.

“It’s the very thing that often prevents them from seeking help in the first place — the kids,” she said. “It’s almost like it has to escalate to a point where they crack. Generally speaking, if there was a rock bottom, that would be it. They worry their ability to care for the kids is being compromised, even if they believe the kids are unaware it is happening.”

In the first season of *Big Little Lies*, Celeste finally finds the courage to leave Perry when she learns one of her young sons has been responsible for hurting another child and is convinced by her counsellor that her children probably know more about the abuse inflicted upon her by their father than she believes.

Manger of Victoria’s South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault and Family Violence

(CASA) Carolyn Worth said publicity around violence against women often encouraged women to seek help.

When positive examples were provided in the media of women who had successfully escaped their abusive partners and forged a happier life, other women were encouraged to seek help also, she said.

“Triggers (for seeking help) are varied. Sometimes it is seeing someone on the television telling their story and how they left and how their life is now. Other times they get worried about the impact on their children and decide to leave. Occasionally the violence has suddenly escalated and they decide it is too dangerous to stay,” Ms Worth said.

When it comes to what to do? How to help?

Chief Executive Officer of White Ribbon Australia, Delia Donovan, says the answer is in everyone in the community looking out for abuse against women, and being ready and willing to stand up, speak out and act when witnessing disrespect, abuse or violence towards women in any form.

Men’s violence against women accounted for one woman’s death per week, with one in four women having experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner since the age of 15 and one in six women having experienced abuse before the age of 15, she said.

“We might not realise it, but we are conditioned by what we read, see and hear so it’s time to start thinking about this and be the change we want to see,” Ms Donovan said. “It can be sexist jokes between friends, it can be noticing the controlling behaviour of a partner, it can be isolation from family and friends. It can be public ridicule and the representation of violence by men or an organisation, towards women. These are all forms of violence, generated through a lack of respect, inequality and unhealthy masculinity that we absolutely must address if we want women to stop being killed at an alarming rate.”

***If you feel at risk of being involved in a family violence incident or believe that someone you know is, please seek some help from police or a support service, such as Victoria’s Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre by calling 1800 015 188 or New South Wales Domestic Violence Line on 1800 65 64 63.***

***In immediate danger, always call triple-0 (000).***