

The Basics of Dating Violence

Naming the Violence

Dating violence or battering is a repeated pattern of actual or threatened acts that emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually hurts another person. In a violent dating relationship, one person is afraid of and intimidated by the other. The couple may be "going out," dating, cohabitating, engaged, or married.

Although teen dating violence is not a new problem, it has only recently been recognized and identified. It is both a silent and hidden crime that crosses all economic, racial, age, religious and class barriers. Studies have revealed that up to 60% of high school students are involved in an abusive relationship before graduation. An estimated 25% of these relationships involve physical assaults. Typically, the abuse begins at the age of 15, when adolescent relationships intensify, but can begin earlier.

The vast majority of the perpetrators of this violence are males. While adolescent girls may hit their boyfriends, there is a significant difference between adolescent males and adolescent females in their use of physical violence. Females are more likely to hit their boyfriends in retaliation or self-defense. Males, however, are three times more likely to report they use violence to intimidate, cause fear, or force their girlfriends to do something.

The level of abuse experienced by adolescent females is not different from the violence experienced by adult woman. For some teens, this violence is lethal. FBI statistics indicate that 20% of all female homicide victims are between the ages of 15-24; one third of these young women are murdered by a husband or boyfriend. These national statistics hold true for Nebraska as well.

The Issue is Power & Control

Many people hold the misconception that dating violence begins with the first hit. However, the abuse begins much earlier. Dating violence involves a range of coercive and abusive behaviors, including threats, intimidation, isolation, and manipulation. The purpose of the abuse is to establish and maintain control over the other person and the relationship. By the time physical abuse is present, a pattern of verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse has already been established.

Emotional Abuse may be difficult to identify because it is often disguised as acts of kindness and concern. Because it is so subtle and it comes from someone the victim trusts, it is extremely manipulative and causes the victim to feel responsible for any problems in the relationship. Common examples include telling her how to think, feel, dress or act to "help" her "better herself" or forcing her to limit contact with family and friends to show him how much she cares. Emotional abuse also involves ignoring her, withholding affection, convincing her she said things she didn't say, or breaking promises.

Verbal Abuse is characterized by put downs, name calling or bossing her around. The purpose of verbal abuse is to belittle the victim and make her feel powerless. This allows the abuser to convince her that she is stupid and worthless, and that she could not survive without him. He will use any mistake she makes (e.g., writing a check for the wrong amount in the check register or being five minutes late for a date) to justify this point and humiliate her.

Sexual Abuse can occur in many forms in a relationship. Like other forms of abuse, sexual abuse occurs on a continuum of verbal, emotional and physical assaults. Examples include: pressuring or coercing a person to have a sexual relationship; accusing her of being a prude, frigid or unfaithful; bragging about the sexual relationship to peers in order to embarrass her; not allowing the use of condoms to prevent pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases; forcing the person to perform sexual acts; or rape.

Physical Abuse is any type of physical control over another person. Examples include: restraining someone from leaving; abandoning someone in a dangerous place after a fight; hitting; pulling hair; shoving; driving too fast or recklessly; or slapping, punching, burning, or stabbing. Physical abuse can and does become lethal in some abusive relationships. The myth that "he only hit me once, it will never happen again" is untrue and dangerous. The abuse will continue to increase in frequency and severity without intervention.

Students may easily identify physical abuse as violence, but fail to identify controlling another person through emotional or verbal coercion as being abusive. The victim, too, may have difficulty recognizing abuse until after the first assault.

In addressing dating violence it is important to remember a black eye given to a 13-year-old by her boyfriend is as serious as any physical assault in an adult relationship. Battering creates the same range of confusion, fear, and guilt, regardless of the person's age or maturity.

Being Battered Hurts

Physical abuse leaves obvious bruises and scars. Often, though, survivors say the emotional and verbal abuse occur with greater frequency and intensity than physical or sexual assaults. The self-doubt, confusion, anger, and sadness caused by the emotional abuse are internalized, causing her to feel worthless and unable to stop it.

For many abused teens, the isolation and control they experience is not readily apparent. In order to appease their partner, they may drop out of activities that they enjoy and give them a sense of worth. For example, their partner may convince them cheerleading is stupid, participating in athletics will take too much time away from the relationship, or that church youth groups are for babies. In addition, their partner may "not allow" them to attend study groups, especially if members of the opposite sex are present; convince them their parents are against the relationship and therefore should be avoided; and insist her friends aren't true friends

and degrade them in some manner. Thus, many victims are forced to limit their individual and scholastic achievements as well as lose contact with friends and other sources of support.

Why She Stays

If abuse is only viewed as involving physical violence, it can be difficult to comprehend why a victim fails to see she is being abused, and even more difficult to understand why she simply doesn't break up with the abuser. It is crucial to remember abuse involves more than physical assaults and it progresses very slowly and subtly. Each time she voices disapproval with his "rules" or attempts to slow down the relationship, he increases his use of violence. The behavior is then rationalized as "love." Jealousy is defended as a sign of how much he cares. Hitting is justified as his only choice when she acts like she doesn't love him. After he has said or done something abusive, he may apologize profusely in attempt to make up for it, minimize what has happened, or deny the event even occurred.

These behaviors are confusing to the victim and cause her to question if his treatment of her is really so bad. These behaviors also make her believe that if she would just do something different—spend more time with him, quit talking to other guys, or show her love like he wants—then the relationship would be perfect. There are also periods in the relationship free from violence. These "good times" keep her hopeful and renew her commitment to him. Consequently, even after an incident of physical violence, she may not want to breakup, but rather attempt to work through the "problems" in the relationship.

The couple's social circle can also play a role in why she stays. Abusers have a very different "public" and "private" face. To her friends, he may appear to be the ideal boyfriend. They may tell her that she is lucky to be dating him and interpret his jealousy and controlling behaviors as signs of caring or commitment. They may even tell her they wish their boyfriend were more like hers. If he is older, popular, or well established, in their group of friends, the pressure to stay with him increases. In addition, she may feel pressure from peers to have a boyfriend regardless of how she is treated.

Teens who live with the abusive partner, have a child, or who live on their own, may feel financial pressure to stay with him as well. If they are witnessing violence at home or being hurt by a parent, their partner's abuse may seem minimal compared to what is happening at home. It is important to remember that the most common factor among pregnant teens is growing up in an abusive home. Many teens become pregnant to escape this violence only to find they are in a new relationship with similar types of abuse.

Why He Batters

Abusers use violence for one reason—to achieve power and control. The abusive partner plans when, where and how he will hurt her. He may claim the abuse is because of something she has done (e.g., worn the wrong clothes, spent too much time with friends, or wasn't there

when he needed her) or because of external factors (e.g., coach wouldn't let him start in the game, service was bad at the restaurant, or he is failing English). He may accuse her of making him so angry, he just "freaked out" or "lost control."

The reality is that he chooses to be abusive regardless of what she does or does not do. During violent episodes, it is important to note that he is very much in control of who and what is hurt or destroyed (e.g., he hits his partner, not the waiter; he smashes her family's picture, not his family photo). Additionally, in the beginning stages of physical abuse, it is rare he will assault her in front of other people.

Although statistics indicate males who grow up in a violent home are more likely to be abusive, the majority of males who witness abuse or who are abused as children (70%) will chose not to repeat this pattern in their intimate relationships. Abuse and violence are learned behaviors and can be unlearned through education and practice. The use of violence is never an inevitable result. It is always a choice.

Alcohol & Drugs: Contributors, NOT Causes

Alcohol and other drugs are frequently involved in incidents of battering; however, alcohol does not cause violent or abusive behavior. Rather, the alcohol or drugs are often used as an excuse to justify or minimize the abuse. "I didn't know what I was doing," or "I just had too much to drink," are common explanations or excuses after an abusive incident in which alcohol was involved. She may also consider alcohol's influence to explain or rationalize his abusive behavior to justify staying in the relationship, (e.g., "If he would just stop drinking, things would be better," or "He's not violent when he's not drinking.")

Although drugs do not cause violent behavior, consumption can intensify the abuse. A perpetrator under the influence may not realize how severely he is hurting his partner. Likewise, if she is under the influence, she may not be able to defend herself or realize the extent of her injuries.

Barriers for Teens

Teens are often reluctant to tell anyone they are being abused. It is very confusing to be in love with someone who hurts you. They are torn between defending their partner and wanting protection from him. Often, a victim only wants the abuse to end, not the relationship.

Because of the dynamics of dating violence, (i.e., the discrepancy between how he treats her and how other people perceive his treatment of her), a teen may think no one will believe her if she talks about the abuse. She may also fear for her safety if he finds out she has told anyone.

Additionally, a teen who admits to being abused may be afraid of losing dating privileges, being denied contact with him, or being blamed for the abuse. She may believe her parents will

not take her relationship seriously, (i.e., she is too young to be “in love”) and expect her to break up with him immediately. She may also fear her parents, siblings, or friends will confront or threaten the abuser and be injured. These fears are not unrealistic.

Teens often feel they will have no protection by coming forward and talking about the abuse. Child Protective Services cannot assist a teen in an abusive relationship. A teen is unable to file a protection order on her own behalf and may need a parent or guardian to file the order. Domestic violence programs are limited in the services they can provide to teens, unless they are married to the abuser, have a child with them, or have parental permission. Youth shelters do not always offer the protection necessary to a victim of dating violence.

Many teens simply do not define and identify the violence as being destructive or a problem in the relationship. Popular television shows, commercials, and music videos continue to portray conflicts in relationships as exciting and flattering (e.g., he wouldn't be so upset if he didn't really care). Not surprisingly, 25-35% of adolescents equate jealousy and possessiveness with love. When asked about violence in their dating relationships, 33% of teens reported the relationship "improved" after an incident of physical violence.

The biggest barrier for teens who are being abused is finding someone who is safe to talk to about the abuse. Twenty-five percent tell no one they are being battered. Of the teens who do reach out they are more likely to talk with a peer (66%) than a parent (26%). For this reason alone, it is crucial for teens to have accurate information on dating violence to help their peers.

Ending Dating Violence

The first step to ending dating violence is to identify all forms of abuse, which can occur in a relationship. Recognizing that anyone can be a victim and that the perpetrator, not the victim, is responsible for the use violence can lessen feelings of isolation and doubt. This can, in turn, encourage teens to end a relationship before the physical abuse begins.

For teens in an abusive relationship, whether they are perpetrating the abuse or being hurt, it is important to convey that no one deserves to be abused. By increasing awareness about the progression of violence, the fact violence is not inevitable, and places to get help, teens can take steps to prevent violence and end abusive relationships safely.

Ultimately, abuse in dating relationships will decrease when healthy, non-violent relationships are modeled and supported by the school and community-at-large. While the results may be slow in coming, teens can begin to reject violence as a legitimate means to resolve conflict and pass these skills on to future generations.