

RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE

According to recent statistics, it is extremely likely that you or someone you know has experienced violence in a dating relationship. Dating violence can take many forms, including psychological and emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. It can occur during casual dating or in serious long-term relationships.

If a boyfriend or girlfriend humiliates, insults, or swears at you, you are experiencing psychological and emotional abuse. Other examples include: attempting to control a boyfriend or girlfriend's activities, trying to destroy his or her self-confidence and self-esteem and isolating the person from other friends and family. Threats of violence are also abusive and should always be taken seriously.

Physical abuse includes such things as hitting, slapping, punching, shoving, kicking, biting and hair-pulling. It also includes the use of a weapon against a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Both teenage boys and teenage girls report being victims of physical violence in relationships. Typically, however, teenage boys and teenage girls use physical force for different reasons and with different results. While both tend to report acting violently because they were angry, teenage boys are much more likely to use force in order to control their girlfriends, while girls more often act violently in self-defense.

Teenage girls suffer more from relationship violence, emotionally and physically. They are much more likely than teenage boys to have serious injuries and to report being terrified. On the other hand, male victims seldom seem to fear violence by their dates or girlfriends, often saying that the attacks did not hurt and that they found the violence amusing.

The term sexual abuse refers to forced or unwanted sexual activity or rape. It is also considered sexual abuse to coerce or pressure someone to engage in sexual activity or try to engage in sexual activity with someone who is under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Teenage girls in heterosexual relationships are much more likely than teenage boys to suffer from sexual abuse.

It is difficult to say how frequently dating violence occurs because different studies and surveys ask about it in different ways and get very different results. Some studies only ask about physical abuse, while others include questions about psychological and emotional abuse and sexual violence. Past estimates of dating violence among middle school and high school students range from 28% to 96%. One recent national survey found that 1 in 11 high school students said they had been hit, slapped or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year. 1 in 11 students also reported that they had been forced to have sexual intercourse against their will. Far greater numbers of teens (as high as 96%) report emotional and psychological abuse in their dating relationships

Know these early warning signs that you're in a dating situation or relationship that could have the potential to become violent:

- Your boyfriend or girlfriend pressures you, soon after you begin dating, to make the relationship very serious, or presses you to have sex.
- Your boyfriend or girlfriend becomes extremely jealous and possessive, and thinks destructive displays of emotion are signs of love.

- Your boyfriend or girlfriend tries to control you and to forcefully make all decisions where the two of you are concerned, refusing to take your views or desires seriously. He/she may also try to keep you from spending time with close friends or family.
- Your boyfriend or girlfriend verbally and emotionally abuses you by doing such things as yelling at you, swearing at you, manipulating you, spreading false and degrading rumors about you, and trying to make you feel guilty.
- Your boyfriend or girlfriend drinks too much or uses drugs and then later blames the alcohol and drugs for his/her behavior.
- Your boyfriend or girlfriend threatens physical violence.
- Your boyfriend or girlfriend has abused a previous boyfriend or girlfriend or accepts and defends the use of violence by others.

If you're in a dating relationship that in any way feels uncomfortable, awkward, tense or even frightening, trust your feelings and get out of it. It could become, or may already be, abusive.

Always remember you have every right to say, "No!" No boyfriend or girlfriend has the right to tell you what you can or should do, what you can or should wear or what kind of friends you should have.

If you are in a violent, or potentially violent, relationship, take the following steps:

- Make a safety plan and get help. Talk with someone you trust—a teacher, a guidance counselor, a doctor, a friend or parent. You may also want to contact the police or a local domestic violence center or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE.
- If you want to stay in the relationship, realize that the violence will not just stop or go away. You cannot change your boyfriend or girlfriend's behavior by changing your behavior, nor are you in any way responsible for the abuse. Your boyfriend or girlfriend may need counseling or other outside help to change and you may need support so that you can begin to heal.

Be on the lookout for friends who may be in violent dating situations or relationships. Do any of your friends' relationships show the warning signs listed above? Do your friends show signs that they have been physically abused or injured in some way?

Friends in abusive relationships may also:

- Change their style of clothing or makeup;
- Seem to lose confidence in themselves and begin to have difficulty making decisions;
- Stop spending time with you and other friends;
- Begin to receive failing grades or quit school activities; or
- Turn to using alcoholic beverages or drugs.

If you suspect a friend is in an abusive or violent relationship, you might try to find out for sure by saying something like, "You don't seem as happy as usual" or asking in general terms, "Is there anything you want to talk about?" This non-confrontational and indirect approach may prompt your friend to reveal what's wrong. Listen without judging, condemning or giving unwanted advice. If a friend wants help, suggest that he or she take the steps listed above in order to be safe and find help.

If you believe your friend is in serious danger, talk with an adult you trust immediately about your friend's situation so that you aren't carrying the burden by yourself. Do not try to "rescue" your friend or be a hero and try to handle the situation on your own.

Take action if you suspect that someone you know is being abusive.

If you feel you are not in danger, talk to the person about his or her use of violence, and make sure that the person understands that it is both wrong and illegal. If the person is ready to make a change, help him or her to get help.

If you are hurting someone else, have the courage to get help!

No matter what the other person does to provoke you, no matter how justified you feel, no matter what your friends do, it is never OK to harm someone else. Remember that physical and sexual violence are illegal and can land you in jail.

You can learn new ways to deal with your anger, to fight fair, to communicate and to give and get love in relationships. Don't let shame or fear stop you- talk to a parent, a teacher, a religious leader, a doctor, a nurse or a guidance counselor immediately. You also can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE (7233) and they can direct you to individuals and groups in your community who can help you to make a change.

This article was created in part from information gathered from the official website of the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center.