

## CHARACTERISTICS OF TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

Teen dating violence, like adult domestic violence, is about power and the desire to control. The dynamics of abuse and victim responses to abuse are also similar. The same mechanics of control and coercion are at work in teen abusive relationships. The abused may feel that it is their “fault” that the abuse occurred and the abuser may feel that it is not their responsibility and that someone else made them abusive. Teen dating violence, like adult domestic abuse, is prevalent in all communities and is not unique to one class, race or culture. Although both males and females may experience dating violence the great majority of victims, as in adult abuse, are females. There are however, several important issues, which are uniquely characteristic of teen dating violence.

**Peer Approval** – Teens experience more reliance on peer approval and the need to conform to peer norms. If these norms characterize dating violence as “normal” behavior then teens may think it is acceptable for abuse to occur in a relationship. The victim is unable to judge if the abuser’s behavior is out of line or unacceptable.

**Gender Role Expectations** – Teens may rely on perceived gender differences, often reinforced by the popular media, which emphasize stereotyped ideas of male dominance and female passivity. There may be an expectation that her status depends on her attachment to a male and on his status. Female socialization also can lead women to take primary or sole responsibility for problem solving in a relationship.

**Lack of Experience** – Teens have less experience in dating and in sexual relationships, which can lead to misunderstandings about appropriate behavior in intimate relationships, the inability to make good decisions and to trust them to take action on their behalf in a relationship. In addition, their partner as proof of love can idealize excessive jealousy and possessiveness by the abuser, and the abuser can use this rationalizing as proof of their love. Even though teen’s relationships are more transient than adult relationships they are often felt to be just as intense, and teen’s inexperience prevents them from putting the relationship into a larger context.

**Little Contact with Adult Resources** – Studies show most teens in violent relationships have not spoken to any adult about the violence. (Worcester, Nancy, “ A More Hidden Crime: Adolescent Battered Women, The Network News, July/August, 1993, p.7)  
Young people may feel that adults will not take them seriously, and that adult intervention may result in loss of independence or trust.

**Less Access to Resources** – Teens often have less access to health care professionals, and shelter space may be scarce for teens.

**Legal Issues** – Legal options may be different and less available than options open to adults. Teens generally have less access to court and police. There may be difficulties in obtaining Orders of Protection, which may not come within Family Court guidelines. Parents or guardians may need to be involved in legal actions or for permission for medical treatment, and for teens this may be a barrier for those who do not want to involve their parents regarding the abuse.

**Pregnancy** – Pregnancy may be part of the abuse. For example, a teenager may be forced into having sex or their partner may refuse to use birth control. Teens, like older victims, are also at a risk of experiencing abuse while they are pregnant. They are often blamed or harshly judged for their pregnancy and may have difficulty accessing resources available to them. These factors can lead to feelings of isolation, helplessness and self-blame, and make it easier for them to be manipulated and controlled.

**Homosexuality** – The dynamics of abuse in gay or lesbian relationships are similar to those in abusive heterosexual relationships. In addition to the normal confusion about gender roles and social norms, homosexual teens may be more isolated due to coming-out issues. Homophobia, absence of visible role models, and fear may prevent homosexual victims, both teens and adults, from disclosing their abuse or seeking help.

**Culture and Race** – Both culture and race can strongly impact a victim's tolerance of abuse and their feelings of isolation and helplessness. For instance, victims from strict cultures that disapprove of dating and sexuality may be desperate for help but may refuse to seek assistance from family members out of fear of reprisal or shame. Seeking outside help may produce further conflict within the family.

Issues of race are also influential in a victim's decision to report an abuser or to get help. For example, young women who believe their future or opportunities are limited due to racism or discrimination, may base their future on their relationships. Individuals raised in a different culture or prejudiced by racism or discrimination may be unwilling to discuss an abusive relationship with others outside of their culture, racial community or family. A desire to protect their partner stems from having shared with their partner a common understanding or common experience as a racial or cultural minority.

**Sexual Abuse** – In addition to date rape, which accounts for 67% of sexual assaults among teens, young victims of dating violence also describe continuous forms of “sexual slavery”. Teen abusers may physically force sex upon their victims, threaten or manipulate them by use of other coercive tactics, such as accusations that attack their acceptability as women or lovers. Feelings of worthlessness, degradation, humiliation, and shame usually follow. Over time these emotions gradually undermine the victim's ability to escape. Since victims of dating violence are relatively young, inexperienced and their sense of themselves as sexual beings may be new or fragile, their vulnerability at this time is magnified.

**Substance Abuse** – Substance abuse, though not the cause of dating violence, may increase the chances of abuse. Alcohol and other drugs reduce inhibitions and the capability to demonstrate self-control and good decision-making skills. For victims, alcohol and drugs may act as a substitute for positive and effective coping strategies. Substance abuse and violence must be confronted simultaneously.

Adapted from “Domestic and Dating Violence – An Information and Resource Handbook”, Metropolitan King County Council, 1996