

SESSION 10: RECOGNIZING RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE

In the last session you thought a lot about characteristics of healthy relationships. Now it's time to think more carefully about what makes a relationship unhealthy. Think about some relationships in your life that seem unhealthy. What do you see that's unhealthy in those relationships?

You might have listed things like dishonesty, jealousy, lack of communication, controlling or feeling controlled. Maybe you thought of a couple where one or both people are workaholics. Maybe you thought of a couple that argues and fights constantly. Maybe you thought about a relationship where there's abuse or violence. Maybe you thought about a relationship where there's alcohol or drug abuse.

Consider the following points:

- Relationship violence is a pattern of destructive behaviors used to exert power and control over a boyfriend/girlfriend.
- The abuse can be physical, verbal, emotional/psychological, financial or sexual. It can happen in person or through digital platforms (text messages, email, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Perpetrators and victims may be women or men and abuse can happen in all kinds of relationships. However, abuse that leads to serious injury is most often done to women by men.
- Although much relationship violence is perpetrated by men against women, it's important to remember that most men are not abusive.
- Relationship violence is too common. You probably know someone who has experienced violence in a romantic or intimate relationship such as dating (casual or long term), marriage or living together.

How do you know when a relationship is potentially dangerous? Here are some warning signs.

WARNING SIGNS

1. Your boyfriend or girlfriend pressures you, soon after you begin dating, to make the relationship very serious, or presses you to have sex.
2. Your boyfriend or girlfriend becomes extremely jealous and possessive and thinks these destructive displays of emotion are signs of love.
3. 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.
4. 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, or trying to make you feel guilty.

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5. Your boyfriend or girlfriend drinks too much or uses drugs and then later blames the alcohol and drugs for the behavior.
6. Your boyfriend or girlfriend threatens physical violence.
7. 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 frightening, trust your feelings and get out of it. It could become, or may already be, abusive.

WHY DOES RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE HAPPEN? There are many reasons. Here are a few big ones:

Power and Control in the Relationship: Sometimes one person is abusive or violent in an attempt to manipulate or intimidate the other person. The violence often happens in a cycle where the tension builds, then violence erupts, followed by feelings of remorse, kindness and affection.

Family History of Violence: Often, both perpetrator and victim grew up in violent households and learned this destructive style of relating.

Gender-Role Messages: Growing up, boys and girls get messages from home, school, the media, friends and society in general about how they're supposed to carry themselves as males and females. Boys often are taught to "act like a man." Acting like a man often means being tough, not showing his feelings, being powerful, being in control, and so on. Girls often get the message that they must have a man in their lives in order to be complete. Popular media such as cable TV, music videos, wrestling matches, and video games often feature men being abusive or violent to women. When young people see these kinds of images over and over, it starts to seem normal and acceptable to some. When young men and women buy into these kinds of messages, they're more likely to be controlling or violent in a relationship or to be attracted to someone who is violent.

Note: Sometimes one or both persons in a relationship don't know how to recognize and manage their anger and they allow it to get out of control, leading to violence. See the handout "*When Anger is Getting Out of Hand*" for some ideas on how to recognize and deal with anger that may get out of control. Out-of-control anger and violence may also show up in other relationships and settings, as opposed to a power and control style of violence that happens only in the relationship.

GROUND RULES: When Anger is Getting Out of Hand

About Anger: It's a normal and natural feeling, but it's what you do with your anger that makes a difference. We all have different ways of expressing anger.

When Anger Goes Unchecked It Can:

- Wound you, your boyfriend/girlfriend and your relationship
- Hurt innocent bystanders like children
- Be so blinding that it keeps you from seeing another point of view or your own role in the conflict
- Lead you to say or do things you later regret
- Cause feelings of affection to fade away
- Invite violence

Signs That Anger or Conflict Is Getting Out Of Hand:

- Either person seems overheated or out of control
- You're arguing in a way that's going nowhere
- You're getting louder and angrier by the minute
- Either of you is saying extremely negative things that you can't take back
- You appear at risk of coming to blows

Some Ground Rules:

- When conflict is getting out of control, terminate it.
- Use a prearranged signal or just say you're taking a time out.
- If possible, remove yourself from the immediate situation so you can cool off.
- Never block your girlfriend/boyfriend from leaving or follow after him or her.
- Once you're away from the conflict, do things to soothe yourself. Don't engage in negative self talk about what your girlfriend/boyfriend did wrong that gets you even angrier.

GROUND RULES: When Anger is Getting Out of Hand *Continued*

- Wait to get back together until you're both feeling normal. Don't bring up the conflict again until you've had some normal time together.
- De-brief the argument. Talk about what happened for both of you.
- Use communication skills to be sure you really understand each other.

Get Help If:

- You have a gut feeling that you're in over your head and can't handle things alone.
- You're irritable all the time and can't get a handle on it.
- The fighting is intense and frequent.
- There's physical violence of any type.
- You see a cycle of angry outbursts followed by feelings of remorse.

Where to Get Help:

- Know the Red Flags, www.knowtheredflags.com
- National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-799-SAFE or www.ndvh.org
- Texas Council on Family Violence, www.tcfv.org
- HHSC Family Violence Program, www.hhsc.state.tx.us/programs
- The Family Violence Prevention Fund, www.endabuse.org

ACTIVITY: How Would You Help?

Imagine that your best friend has gotten involved with someone who seems very controlling. You have had a very uncomfortable feeling about this person right from the start. Yesterday, you saw them arguing. The new boyfriend/girlfriend snatched your friend's arm very forcefully and said some very nasty things right in front of you. It was ugly.

It's been a couple of days since you've seen your best friend. Now you're together and your friend is acting like the incident never happened.

How would you try to help your friend?

Write down the words you would use to start a conversation with your friend about the incident.

Where would you try to send your friend for help in this community (or online)?

ACTIVITY: Teen Dating Violence Awareness Campaign

February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month. Do some online research on teen dating violence. Create a poster, flyer, or a digital strategy to educate youth in your school or community about digital dating violence. Check out <http://www.athinline.org/>. If you'd like, pair up with another student in the class to create a joint campaign. Often two minds are better than one!