

Abusive Adolescent Dating Relationships

By

Irene M. Swerdlow-Freed, Psy.D.

Increasingly in our practice we are seeing teenage girls in abusive dating relationships. These high school and early college students are usually brought to treatment by parents who are concerned about changes in their daughter's behavior including failing grades, depression and isolation from family and friends.

In assessing the situation we note that a strong obsessive commitment to a new boyfriend is often identified as the beginning of the negative changes. Abused teenagers and young adults defend their "love", citing their boyfriend's deep commitment. What they perceive as commitment, however, is often extreme jealousy and possessiveness. What they deem to be their boyfriend's involvement is often, in fact, controlling behavior. What they see as romantic... "He told me on our first date that he could never live without me"... is often manipulation and lust, not love.

It is important in our work with young women to recognize the warning signs of abusive relationships, to clarify with them what real love is, and to assist them in seeking and developing rewarding positive relationships that enrich rather than destroy life.

The early stages of abusive relationships often seem unbelievably romantic. The boyfriend is so attentive; he goes with her everywhere; he is jealous of her time with others. He gives her gifts and says he loves her very early on in the relationship. He comes to her in times of need when the rest of the world does not understand him and looks to her to take care of him. He speaks about their being together forever. However, as the relationship continues, his "love" increasingly becomes intimidating. He may interrogate her regarding where she has been or accuse her of flirting with other males. He may call her names or put her down, or blame her for his anger. As she moves further and further away from family and friends, his influence becomes more powerful. She may spend less time focusing on schoolwork and more time anxiously trying to please him. She may alter her behavior to secure his acceptance and approval, making sure she is home in case he calls, breaking family rules to meet him late at night or going places against her parents' wishes to "prove" her love.

These young women come to treatment with a strong dose of denial – "He's not that bad...he is just stressed out because his boss is on him all the time...it's not his fault." They exhibit intense, pervasive feelings of insecurity, generated in part by the boyfriend's comments, that no one else will ever love them as much as he does. They often convey a sense that if the relationship fails it will have been their fault. A relationship of this kind can be very detrimental to a young woman's personal development, to her sense of self and to an understanding of her own role in interpersonal interactions.

Without intervention, such a relationship can transform from being emotionally and verbally abusive into one that is marked by physical and sexual abuse. This is

especially true in situations in which the young man has a history of physical or psychological abuse as a child, has observed abuse within his own family, or is using or abusing alcohol or drugs. If the young woman has been raised in an abusive home, she may also expect that abuse is an inherent part of male-female relationships.

A teenager in an abusive relationship often believes that she has no one to turn to. She has distanced herself from her friends and feels she cannot discuss this situation with her parents. She may be embarrassed to break up with the “best guy in the whole senior class” or feel guilty that she has not tried hard enough to make the relationship work. Or, she may be frightened to leave the relationship because her boyfriend may threaten to kill himself or hurt her if she breaks up with him.

When a teenager is brought to us because of school failure, an oppositional attitude at home, or depression, we carefully explore her personal relationships. If we find she is in an abusive relationship, we offer support and information so she can make wiser, better informed decisions. We realize that she may not easily give up the abusive relationship. Frequently parents have already tried to end the relationship to no avail. Rather we attempt, through psychotherapy to explore her ideas about love, her expectations of men and women in relationships, her choice in a boyfriend, and other important issues.

We offer information about the stages of a healthy relationship: attraction, friendship, learning about one another’s values, behavior, faults and needs, and the equality and joint commitment essential to the continued development of a mature love. We discuss the dynamics of abusive relationships, the reasons for this behavior and the psychological effects of abuse. We offer observations that allow her to explore her present situation more honestly and in greater detail.

Our psychotherapy also focuses on retrieving the self-esteem and self-worth that have been too tightly tied to the relationship, leaving little room for her to independently evaluate who she is and who she wants to be. It is important as we discuss her feelings about herself to identify ways in which she succeeded in the past and can succeed in the future. We work to reunite her with friends and family and restore a sense of promise for her future.

Although we have focused on teenage girls, it is worth noting that teenage boys also are involved in abusive dating relationships. We have observed similar symptoms, including depression, school failure and low self-esteem, in these patients, and similar treatment is necessary.

For more information or to make an appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at (248) 539-7777. Our offices are conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390.