



Dating Violence

Information from...

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

What is dating violence?

Dating violence is any intentional sexual, physical or psychological attack on one partner by the other in a dating relationship. This definition reflects the belief that all forms of abuse are harmful and worth taking seriously. A wide range of harmful acts can occur in dating relationships that go beyond what people traditionally think of as “serious” abuse, that is, physical or sexual violence. Although both men and women may act abusively, the abuse of women by men is more pervasive and usually more severe.

Dating violence is more likely to happen when the aggressor has been drinking. This often leads people to blame alcohol for the problem. In fact, abusers themselves use alcohol as an excuse for being violent.

Sexual abuse includes unwanted sexual touching, using force or pressure to get a partner to consent to sexual activity, rape and attempted rape, and attempting or having intercourse with a person who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. These kinds of abuse are more often directed at women. While all these acts are damaging emotionally, they vary in the extent to which they result in physical injury.

Sexual assault is particularly dangerous when the aggressor refuses to use condoms despite the risk of HIV (AIDS) infection. Such assaults cause extra distress to women because they must also deal with the fear of being infected.

Physical abuse includes shoving, slapping, choking, punching, kicking, biting, burning, hair pulling, using a weapon, threatening someone with a weapon, or forcibly confining someone.

These attacks cause both emotional and physical harm. Typically, men use physical force to assert control while women use it to protect themselves, to retaliate or because they fear that their partner is about to assault them.¹ Some women live in terror of such attacks. Men do not seem to fear assaults by their female partners. In general, men think of women's use of force as ineffectual.

Emotional abuse, like sexual and physical abuse, varies in its intensity and its consequences. It includes behaviour such as insulting or swearing at a partner, belittling them, threatening or terrorizing them, destroying their property or possessions, isolating them from friends and relatives, and treating them with irrational possessiveness or extreme jealousy. Emotional abuse originates in the aggressor's desire to control the other person's behaviour. By undermining the other person's self-confidence, the abuser tries to limit a dating partner's ability to act independently.²

Both men and women use emotional abuse as a way to control their partners. Men are more likely to escalate the abuse when they think they are losing control. When words are no longer effective, men will sometimes resort to physical violence.

Both partners suffer emotional harm as a result. Society, however, too often downplays the effects of emotional abuse because there is no visible harm. As a result, communities offer little support to deal with emotional abuse by both men and women.

How widespread is the problem?

Increased concern about interpersonal abuse in Canadian society is reflected in the increased number of studies on the topic (see Endnotes).³ All of the studies show that dating abuse is a serious problem in Canada, but it is still difficult to assess its extent. This is because different surveys use different questions to determine if a person has been abused or abusive: some researchers use legal (i.e., *Criminal Code*) definitions of assault⁴ while others rely on a broader definition based on *potential* harm, both emotional and physical.⁵

In any case, between 16%⁶ and 35%⁷ of women surveyed say they have experienced at least one physical assault by a male dating partner.

Studies on sexual abuse in dating are even less clear-cut because the definition of sexual abuse varies, and responses from men and women differ so much. Kelly and DeKeseredy⁸ found

that 27.8% of the women they surveyed reported at least one incident of sexual abuse in the 12 months preceding the study. Fully 45.1% of the women said they had been victimized since leaving high school.⁹ Based on

Criminal Code definitions of sexual assault, Roberts¹⁰ found that 37% of Canadian women had experienced at least one sexual assault since the age of 16.

Myths about Dating Violence

Myth	Reality
Women are at greatest risk of being assaulted by strangers.	Canadian, British and U.S. studies indicate that women are at far greater risk of being assaulted by men they know. Dating partners are more dangerous than strangers.
Jealousy is a sign of love.	Jealousy is the most common reason for assaults in dating relationships. When a man continually accuses a woman of flirting or having an affair, and is suspicious of everyone he sees with her, he is possessive and controlling.
When a woman gets hit by her partner, she must have provoked him in some way.	No one deserves to be hit. Whether or not there was provocation, violence is always wrong. It never solves problems, although it often silences the victim.
Women in abusive dating relationships stay because they enjoy being abused.	Women who are abused by their dating partners do not stay in the relationship because they like being bullied. Most victims want to improve their relationship rather than end it. Adolescent girls, in particular, feel social pressure to stick it out because having a “bad” boyfriend is considered better than having no boyfriend at all.
Men cannot control their sexual urges, and if a woman gets her date sexually aroused, she deserves what she gets.	Men are capable of controlling themselves. That’s why forcing sex on a partner is illegal. Even if a woman has consented to petting or necking, she still has the right to control her own body. When a woman says NO or NO MORE, then the man is required by law to stop.

Myths about Dating Violence (cont’d)

Warning signs

Myth	Reality
Men have the right to expect sexual favours if they pay for dates or if they have a longstanding relationship with a woman.	This myth is particularly persistent among teenagers. In fact, it is unreasonable to expect sex in return for initiating and paying for dates. And not every long-term relationship has to lead to “going all the way”. Sex must be voluntary, and both partners have to agree on when they are ready.
Maybe things will get better.	Once violence begins in a dating relationship, it usually gets worse without some kind of intervention. Waiting and hoping he’ll change is not a good strategy. Partners in an abusive relationship need help to break out of the pattern.
“Name calling” doesn’t hurt anyone.	Emotional abuse is often considered harmless “name calling”. But name calling hurts; that’s why people use it. Emotional abuse lowers the victim’s self-esteem, sometimes permanently. For many women it is the most damaging aspect of abusive relationships.
I can tell if a guy is going to be a “hitter” just by looking at him.	Abusers come in all sizes and shapes. They are not the stereotypical muscle-bound thugs portrayed in the media. They are in the classroom, at the dance, or living next door.
It’ll never happen to me!	Dating violence <i>can</i> happen to you. It is not limited to a particular social class, or any single ethnic or racial group. Some women are victimized on their first date while others are assaulted after dating a long time. Everyone is at risk.

The following are general warning signs of the potential for sexual or physical violence in dating relationships. Each warning sign is accompanied by facts or approaches that may help you reduce your risk of being victimized. This information may also help you to offer better support to women who are assaulted.

Warning sign: Your partner makes threats of violence.

Reducing the risk: Any threat should be taken seriously. Get help immediately when a partner threatens to use violence. It is not a joke or a game. Men who threaten will generally carry out their threats. You can get help

from counsellors, women's shelters, teachers and a variety of community groups. Your friends may also offer support, but be cautious. If the person you go to for advice trivializes your experience or tells you "boys will be boys," go elsewhere.

Warning sign: Your partner is obsessed with dominating and controlling you.

Reducing the risk: Exploring your partner's attitude to women is probably a useful technique for reducing risk. Knowing how he feels about issues like equality between partners or compromise in decision making is important. Look for early signs that he has to "have it all his own way".

Warning sign: Your partner is sexually possessive and often degrades or humiliates you.

Reducing the risk: Possessiveness should be addressed directly. You have to tell your partner that it will not be tolerated. Whether you are dating someone or not, you have the right to do what you want with your body. If he objects, he can always leave the relationship.

Warning sign: You know your dating partner abused a former girlfriend. His father is physically abusive. Your partner accepts or defends the use of violence.

Reducing the risk: Dating abuse is often part of a continuing pattern of behaviour. If your partner was abusive

in a previous relationship, then the risk is very high that he will be abusive in this relationship. Men often become accustomed to violence because they see it as a way of life in their family or peer group. To break this pattern, urge your partner to get counselling.

Many men discuss their use of violence with their peers. Friends should tell friends that abuse is wrong. Women should be encouraged to report their experiences. When the victim is silent, the abuser may think he can "get away with it". Silence may also give him the message that his violence isn't really a problem.

What can you do?

If you are **being abused**, get out and get help. Informed counsellors can help you deal with the emotional and physical consequences of the abuse.

If you want to stay and “work it out” with him, insist that he do more than just apologize. He needs to get counselling. Violent men do not just stop; the first blow is never the last.

If you suspect that **someone you know is being abused**, listen and be supportive. It is important *not to blame her* for the abuse. Tell her that what is happening is wrong and that he is responsible for his actions – she didn’t provoke the violence or deserve it.

Let her know that he won’t just stop. Both of them need help. She needs to heal, and he needs to be taught how to behave.

If you suspect that **someone you know is being abusive**, confront him about his use of violence. Tell him that it is wrong and illegal. Make him see that he is responsible for his actions; don’t accept any excuses.

Tell him that sexual assault is any unwanted sexual contact and that includes taking advantage of a woman who has been drinking or taking drugs. Point out that a sexual assault conviction could mean 10 years in prison.

Where to go for help

Most communities have services for victims of abuse and for abusers. These organizations will provide you with information and support. The YWCA may be one place to start. Local rape and sexual assault crisis centres can also be very helpful.

If you’re still in school, ask a guidance counsellor or a teacher to help you find an agency that works with young people. Teenagers can also call the Kids Help Phone toll free at 1-800-668-6868.

If you want to end violence in dating relationships, don’t be afraid to stand up for your beliefs. Tell those around you that violence is always wrong. Talk about other ways to deal with problems in relationships.

Support education programs in schools, universities, colleges and the wider community that address issues of male violence against women and that seek to end violence by promoting greater equality in dating relationships. For example, the issues of jealousy and power and how they relate to sexual abuse in dating should be part of the school curriculum.

Join the campaign to persuade people that **NO MEANS NO** and that the men who deal the blows, not the women they hit, are responsible for the violence.

Suggested Reading

“Dating Violence: Not an Isolated Phenomenon” by Marina Princz. *Vis-à-Vis*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1992): pp. 1-4. Available from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada, Ottawa, ON K1A 1B4. Telephone: 1-800-267-1291

Sexual Assault by Shirley Pettifer and Janet Torge, published by the Montreal Health Press Inc. (1992). Available from the Montreal Health Press at P.O. Box 1000, Station Place du Parc, Montreal, QC H2W 2N1

Dating Violence Prevention and It's Not Your Fault by the Canadian Red Cross Society (1992). Available from the Canadian Red Cross Society, Fraser Region, Suite 207 – 88 Tenth Street, New Westminster, BC V3M 6H6

Sexual Assault: A Help Book for Teens in the Northwest Territories by Diana Barr (1992). Available from the Victims Assistance Committee, Department of Justice, Government of the Northwest Territories, P.O. Box 1320, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9

Just A Kiss, a photo novella about dating violence (1993). Available from Battered Women's Support Services, P.O. Box 1098, Postal Station A, Vancouver, BC V6C 2T1

Teenage Girls and Acquaintance Assault, available in English and Spanish from Planned Parenthood of Toronto, 36B Prince Arthur Avenue, Toronto, ON M5R 1A9

Degrassi Talks: Abuse (1992). Significant focus of the book is on date rape and dating violence. Available from Boardwalk Books Inc., P.O. Box 6248, Station A, Toronto, ON M5W 1P6

Educational Packages (There is a cost for these.)

Preventing Violence in Dating Relationships: A Teaching Guide (1993). Available from Education Wife Assault, 427 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1X7

Outreach to Teens: A Manual for Counsellors Who Work with Teen Victims of Violence Against Women (1992). Available from Cumberland County Transition House Association, P.O. Box 1141, Amherst, NS B4H 4L2

Healthy Relationships: A Violence-Prevention Curriculum (1994). Available from Men for Change, P.O. Box 33005, Quinpool Postal Outlet, Halifax, NS B3L 4T6

Dating Violence Prevention: Overview and Response (1992). Available from the Canadian Red Cross Society, Fraser Region, Suite 207 – 88 Tenth Street, New Westminster, BC V3M 6H8

A.S.A.P., A School-based Anti-Violence Program (1993). Available from the London Family Court Clinic, 254 Pall Mall Street, Suite 200, London, ON N6A 5P6

Audio-Visual

The Family Violence Audio-Visual Catalogue available through the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence includes more than 70 films and videos that can be borrowed through the regional offices of the National Film Board of Canada. "Right From the Start" and "The Crown Prince" are highly recommended.

"Not Just Anybody", part of the Madison Series, is available from Forefront Productions, 609-402 West Pender Street, Vancouver, BC V6B 1T6

Endnotes

1. Thorne-Finch, R. *Ending the Silence: The Origins and Treatment of Male Violence Against Women*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992, p.10.
2. *Ibid.*, p.13.
3. Cairns, K. V. and J. Wright. *A Survey of Unwanted Sexual Attention in the University of Calgary Residence Complex*. Report to University Housing. Calgary: University of Calgary, 1993.

4. Rodgers, K. "Wife Assault: The Findings of a National Survey," *Juristat: Service Bulletin*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (1994): vol. 14, no. 9: p.3.
5. Kelly, K. and W. DeKeseredy. "The Incidence and Prevalence of Woman Abuse in Canadian University and College Dating Relationships," *Journal of Human Justice*. (1993): vol. 4, no. 2: pp.25-52.
6. Rodgers, *ibid.*, p.12
7. Kelly, *ibid.*, p.28.
8. *Ibid.*, p.29.
9. *Ibid.*, p.24.
10. Roberts, J. "Criminal Justice Processing of Sexual Assault Cases," *Juristat: Service Bulletin*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (1994): vol. 14, no. 7: p.1.

Bibliography

Check, J. V.P. and V. LaCrosse. *Attitudes and Behaviour Regarding Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Violence in Metropolitan Toronto High School Students*. Toronto: The LaMarsh Research Programme Reports on Violence and Conflict Resolution, 1988.

Elliot, S., D. Odynak and H. Krahn. *A Survey of Unwanted Sexual Experiences among University of Alberta Students*. Research report to the Council on Student Life. Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1992.

Finkleman, L. *Report of the Survey of Unwanted Sexual Experiences among Students of the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton and Saint Thomas University*. Fredericton: University of New Brunswick Counselling Services, 1992.

Fitzpatrick, D. and C. Halliday. *Not the Way to Love: Violence against Young Women in Dating Relationships*. Nova Scotia: Cumberland County Transition House Association, 1992.

Litch-Mercer, S. *Not a Pretty Picture: An Exploratory Study of Violence Against Women in High School Dating Relationships*. Toronto: Education Wife Assault, 1987 (revised 1988).

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