

Teen Dating Violence Myths and Facts

Myth: If a person stays in an abusive relationship, it must not really be that bad.

Fact: When things get bad, people leave, escape, or protect themselves. Right? Not always true. Almost 80% of girls who have been physically abused will continue to date their abusers. There are a variety of reasons why people stay. These include fear, emotional dependence, low self-esteem, feeling responsible, confusing jealousy and possessiveness with love, threats of more violence, or hope that the abuser will change. For teenagers, these reasons are compounded by peer pressure, a fear of getting in trouble with adults, and the potential loss of friends. We need to find ways to lessen the stigma and perceived consequences of asking for help among teens.

Myth: Teen dating violence is just arguing. It doesn't have the same consequences/isn't as dangerous as domestic violence in adult relationships.

Fact: First, teen dating violence isn't just limited to arguing. It includes physical, sexual, and emotional/psychological abuse, and stalking — all of which are very real and can be very damaging. Emotional abuse and stalking can take place in person, electronically, via text, or online. Secondly, teen dating violence is just as dangerous and the impact is just as far reaching. Beyond the immediate impact of abuse, victimized teens are also at risk for serious health issues. Research shows that abused teens are more likely to use alcohol, tobacco, and cocaine, engage in unhealthy weight control behaviors and risky sexual behaviors, are more likely to become pregnant, and are more likely to seriously consider or attempt suicide. These are serious, long-term consequences that can negatively affect lifetime well-being.

Sadly, there is also an increase in indirect self-destructive behaviors. For example, after such an assault, it is not uncommon to see teenagers neglecting schoolwork, neglecting friends, neglecting family, and neglecting sports activities. It is also important to note, that a crucial line of defense is that of primary care medicine — whether it be pediatrics or OB/GYN. While these victims may not necessarily seek out mental health care, it is not uncommon for victims of such violence to see their pediatrician or their OB/GYN for what presents as a physical or medical dilemma, but what in truth is actually the psychological reaction to trauma. Oftentimes, these symptoms are indicative of increased levels of depression, alcohol and substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress.

Myth: Teen dating violence only occurs between boys and girls.

Fact: Violence can occur in any relationship. In fact, LGBTQ youth may be more likely to experience dating violence compared to heterosexual youth. These youth are at higher risk for being victimized and are experiencing the same types of violence as those in opposite-sex relationships, but are the least likely to tell anyone or seek help. Why is this? Along with the same reasons why people don't leave heterosexual relationships, LGBTQ youth also have to worry about the threat and fear of being outed by their partner. Knowing this, interventions tailored specifically to the LGBTQ community should be developed. Once again, we need to help these youth feel safe enough to ask for help.

Myth: Only girls can be victims of dating violence.

Fact: The reality is that anyone can be a victim of dating violence. Research has shown that 2 out of 5 females and 1 out of 3 males report being victimized in a dating relationship. Additionally, males aren't the only abusers. One study found that more girls (41%) than boys (29%) reported perpetrating at some point in their lives. The media typically shows male perpetrators, so what message do our teens receive about abusers? Will victimized boys feel like they can come forward if they think they're the only ones?

So, what can we do? It's obvious that we need to be educating kids at the most basic level. We can't expect them to seek out help or use the resources provided if they're too scared, too confused, or are unaware of what's really happening to them. We need to challenge their beliefs about teen dating violence and provide resources designed specifically for teens involved in violent relationships. There are several promising school-based programs available, influencing attitudes, reducing bullying, and reducing teen dating violence. By educating our youth, we can empower them to be their own advocates, encouraging each other to seek help and stop the cycle of abuse.