

twenty six

Ignoring Escalating Domestic Violence

Dear Fellow RA,

Hi there! My name is Susan, and I'm a senior at Aikins University. Aikins is a pretty small school on the East Coast. We have about 5,000 undergraduates, and we're serious about academics. Our entire city is a historical place, and there's always a lot to learn both on and off campus. Most students here go on to get graduate degrees. I just love being an RA. Somehow I've managed to maintain a 3.9 GPA, my position as head cheerleader, and president of my sorority while being an RA. Let me tell you, that takes a lot of work! As an RA for two years now, and I've learned a lot. I thought I had seen just about everything, until a couple of months ago. Then I got caught up in a situation I never would have expected.

The Situation Move-in was great, and because most of the women on my hall were juniors and seniors, everyone was pretty independent. Everything was fine until a few weeks before winter break. One of my residents, Mandy, seemed a little distant and stressed, but that was to be expected with final exams and all. Everyone was kind of tense. One evening, as I was doing rounds, I heard a loud voice coming from Mandy's room. I paused by her door and realized that the voice belonged to Mandy's boyfriend, Mike. I had seen them together around campus, and they usually seemed pretty happy. That night, though, Mike was screaming and I thought I heard Mandy crying. I wanted to knock and tell them to quiet down, but I figured it wasn't my business. Couples fight sometimes, right? So I just finished my rounds and hoped it would blow over soon.

Over the next few days, things seemed to get worse. Mandy wouldn't talk to anyone, she was crying all the time, and I heard from a couple other residents that they saw Mike yelling and grabbing Mandy in the lounge. I told them that Mike always seemed nice enough, and it was probably a misunderstanding. But I started feeling pretty uneasy. So I went to Mandy and let her know that other residents heard the arguing. I suggested that if things were so bad maybe she and Mike should go their separate ways. Mandy just looked at me and said Mike was "under a lot of pressure" and everything would be OK soon. I told her to make sure it was, and I left. Huge mistake. Huge.

The next day, there was a knock on my door, and there was Mandy between two police officers. Her eye was swollen and bruised, and it was obvious that she had been crying . . . again. It seemed that Mandy and Mike had gotten into another argument, and when Mandy started to leave, Mike hit her. She tried to get away, but Mike followed her and attacked her in a local store. Mike was arrested, and the police brought Mandy home.

Getting Some Advice Of course, I had to inform my resident director, who had to make a report to residence life. My RD told me I should speak with Dr. Richards, the staff psychologist and outreach coordinator at the counseling center, to learn more about abusive relationships. Dr. Richards told me that domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner, and it is more common in young adults than many people realize. She also taught me that you may be in an abusive relationship if your partner calls you names; insults or continually criticizes you; is jealous of outside relationships or acts possessive; tries to isolate you from family and friends; monitors where you go, who you call, and who you spend time with; threatens to hurt you; humiliates you; damages property when angry; pushes, slaps, bites, kicks, or chokes you; traps you or keeps you from leaving; or uses physical force in sexual situations.

When I thought about it, I could see some of the signs in Mandy's relationship. Mike's behavior was aggressive and threatening, and it was obvious that he tried to intimidate her. Dr. Richards also told me that many victims will deny the abuse because they're afraid or embarrassed, or they feel that they deserve it. A lot of times they'll even make excuses for the abuser. I thought about Mandy telling me how much pressure Mike was under when I confronted her about the arguments, and I felt sick. I couldn't believe how blind I had been.

A Second Chance Naturally, I couldn't undo what had already been done, but I did have another conversation with Mandy. I apologized for not recognizing that she was in trouble and for not asking if she needed help. I asked her if there was anything I could do for her. Mandy told me that she had to file charges against Mike and she wanted to file a restraining order as well, so she could use some support in doing that. She said she was really embarrassed that she let the situation get so out of hand, and she thought

she didn't have anyone to turn to because she barely spoke to her friends anymore. I let her know that there were a lot of people who cared about her and that she had support from me, the other residents, and all of her other friends. I also let her know that she wasn't the one who "let" the situation get out of hand; Mike did. I also suggested that she visit the counseling center and speak with someone to help resolve her feelings and fears.

Lessons Learned I realize that I may not always be able to tell if someone is a victim of domestic violence, but I should be more active about getting involved if I suspect that someone is being intimidated or threatened. Hopefully, I won't have to deal with this issue again, but if I do I'll be more prepared. More than anything I learned through my conversation with the counselor in the counseling center about some of the signs to watch for in an abusive relationship. Being an RA showed me that so much is going on with our residents. We might think that they lead perfect lives, but so many of them hide hurt just underneath the surface. Part of our job is to recognize that hurt and try to help them deal with it. In the end, their life is their responsibility. But it is our responsibility to do what we can to help them live and learn in a safe community. I hope you learned from my experience. Have a great year!

See ya!
Susan

Discussion Questions

1. When did Susan have the chance to intervene on Mandy's behalf, and when did she not?
2. Why didn't Susan speak to Mandy and Mike about their arguments?
3. What actions could Susan have taken instead?
4. How can you recognize that a resident may be a victim of domestic violence?
5. Would you be comfortable talking with a resident that you believe is being abused? Why or why not?
6. What are the most helpful things you learned from this scenario?
7. How will you act differently as an RA, based on this new knowledge?

Developmental Questions

1. When a man is physically abusing a woman, what are some of the ways that we can support the woman?
2. Given that violence is a nondevelopmental challenge, are there any developmental ways to address this situation more broadly?
3. What are some support systems you have to help you through this situation?
4. What, ultimately, is the best way for us to both challenge and support the abusive man?

Tips on Domestic Violence

1. Domestic violence is not “none of your business”!
2. Remember we always intervene if our residents’ safety is at risk.
3. “Low-level” violence can escalate quickly; intervene as soon as you suspect domestic violence.
4. Always refer the survivor to a counselor.
5. As with all serious incidents, tell your supervisor immediately.

Resources

Web Sites

Futures Without Violence—Includes quick links for help, facts, and materials about domestic violence. <http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/> or <http://endabuse.org/>

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence—Provides information on public policy, position papers, and ideas to take action about domestic violence. <http://www.ncadv.org/>

The National Domestic Violence Hotline—Contains information on how to locate help for domestic violence in your area. <http://www.ndvh.org/>

National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women—Extensive research-based information about domestic and sexual violence. <http://www.vawnet.org/>

Violence Against Women Online Resources—Includes many free documents about legal issues and domestic violence. <http://www.vaw.umn.edu/library/>

Women’s Law—Provides advice on navigating the legal process for protection orders and filing other charges. <http://www.womenslaw.org/>

Books and Journals

Brosi, M. W., & Rolling, E. S. (2010). A narrative journey for intimate partner violence: From victim to survivor. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 38(3), 237–250.