**Relationship Abuse Patterns Among Teens**

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**Introduction**

The first glimpse of romantic attachment among teenagers can often be an exciting, euphoric, and nerve-wracking experience. Unfortunately for over 25% of the female population involved, the nerve-wracking feeling becomes much more prominent and often overwhelms the relationship.⁠1 Emotional, physical and digital abuse has become a normalized expectation in relationships. With teenage partner domestic abuse affecting a third of the young adolescents, this issue demands attention. While abuse is heeded in today’s society as being primarily physical, this misconception does not begin to capture the full picture of what abuse is. Bringing the less prominent forms of abuse to the public’s attention is imperative because if we learn to recognize and learn to prevent these kinds of violence we will be able to raise the consciousness towards these issues. Doing so will sanguinely erase the stigma of more ambiguous forms of abuse being seen as less “legitimate” forms of abuse and go on to address a greatly ignored issue in the lives of our young adults and teenagers. Specifically, addressing these issues of teenage dating abuse is necessary to securing a more informed, protected, and safer adult generation. Addressing this in adolescence stops the issue as it is just beginning because it goes to realign the way we develop our relationship ideas at a younger age. Prevention and rehabilitation is possible but only through allowing for spaces of conversation and actions taken for education.

**Digital abuse, the new epidemic**

Digital abuse is becoming a new and exponentially increasing issue among scholars and psychological institutions. With media becoming an integral part of our lives, it also brings about a new mechanism of control among abusers notably for the younger generations. With the help of technology, connection with victims is quicker and more accessible than ever. Victims of the technological era face a distinct situation from abuse in years previous. While victims were once able to escape the fears and frustration of abuse, at least temporarily while the predator was away or distracted, technology has enabled constant contact and thus the presence of abuse even when the abuser is not physically present. Such an inexpiable form of abuse can lead to emotionally catastrophic consequences.

Digital abuse includes using information from social media to embarrass victims and coercing the victim for sexually explicit messages or photos, posting embarrassing photos of the victim. Digital abuse also includes threatening the victim for not responding to personal messages, and asking for or hacking the victim’s text messages or social media. In fact, the most frequent form of harassment or abuse was tampering with a partner’s social networking account without permission. Nearly 1 in 10 teens in relationships report having this happen to them in the past year.⁠2 Over 25 percent of dating teens report they’ve been digitally victimized by their partner.⁠3 Abusers do not often act alone in one form of control. Notably, 96% of teens who are digitally abused are also likely to be abused in other ways.⁠4 Specifically, 84% of teens who were digitally abused were also psychologically abused by their partners. Unsurprisingly, 52% of teens who are digitally abused are also physically abused, and teens that are digitally abused are 5 times more likely to be sexually coerced.⁠5 The motivation for digital abuse stems from the abuser’s need for constant control. Often times we credit the abuser with wanting stability in relationships or a guarantee of affection, but in fact the motivations behind abuse are much more discomforting. Abusers need to feel like they are able to manage the things their partner do or say in a public media space. Digital abuse is meant to isolate the victim in our interconnected world. By demanding the partner’s focuses on texting or calling or remaining in constant contact with the abuser, it distracts or prevents the victim from connecting with others or seeking support from a contrasting source.

The sad effects of digital abuse extend well beyond the public embarrassment or the fearful nature that second hand observers are able to notice. It often leads to the damaging effect of self censorship and internalized restraint which is often why the victim remains silent. When abusers are in this situation they may try to cut themselves from the public eye or reduce their social media appearance in order to not upset or cause problems with their abuser. Fears of upsetting the abuser will often change the behavior of the victim in small scale and in large scale ways. A lack of sleep in the victim or an increase in fearful behavior may be noticed because of the pressure the abuser puts on the teen.⁠6 Specifically for digital abuse, it is important to remember that any relationship where passwords to social networking sites are shared or given by one individual but not the other is a strong sign of disproportional power and is often an easy way to site digital abuse. Red flag signs may also include the victim being anxious or fearful when they are not able to be in contact with their cell phone or other digital sources out of fear that the abuser may try to contact them. Teens who suffer digital abuse are also more likely to develop eating disorders, binge drink, and abuse illegal substances. There is a higher rate of depression among digitally abused teens as well as a 73% chance of developing of an anxiety disorder.⁠7 Often times the stereotype of the texting bratty teenage girl allows us to dismiss the importance or possible damage that can come through technology but this is only a boilerplate ideal reinforced by an abuse friendly culture. If we stopped and listened to the fears and concerns teenagers have rather than dismiss them as silly drama or oversensitivity and whining, we would be able to reduce the effect digital abuse has on adolescence.

**Physiological abuse, the newly recognized wave**

Emotional abuse is becoming a more commonly recognized as a “legitimate” form of abuse when in the past it was not as kindly recognized. There is a greater insurgence of studies depicting physical damaging effects of emotional abuse. While physical abuse and digital abuse are easily proved by concrete physical evidence often times it is hard to have the same validation or proof of emotional abuse. In many cases in order to seek help for emotional abuse a victim must recognize they are being abused. While simple in theory, abuse tactics such as gaslighting, crazymaking and lying all help to exacerbate the insidious nature of emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is rooted in trying to make the victim feel as if they are dependent on the abuser; this makes the victim easier to control. This sort of abuse can lead to a vacillation of issues with short and long term effects. The ignorance and denial of this abuse is far to prevalent in our society.

Emotional abuse is complex to define as it often encompasses a miscellany of specific instances. Emotional abuse may include things such as attempting to embarrass the teen in the proximity of peers in order to secure dominance or gain feelings of power, delegitimize the feelings or concerns of the victims, belittle the accomplishments or aspirations of the teen in order to make theirs seem more imperative and put themselves above the victim, abusers may require permission for certain actions as another way to ensure preeminence. Often times abusers engage in tactics such as gaslighting or, causing a victim to question their own feelings, instincts, and sanity, which gives the abusive partner a lot of power. These tactics are used to discredit the victim or make them doubt that the abuse that is happening to them. Emotional abuse covers a wide array of situations and is dejectedly more common than what may be perceived. Emotional abuse is the most common tactic of abuse among teens with 47.8% of teens who have dated in the last year has experienced emotional abuse.⁠8 26% of female girls report enduring verbal abuse thought relationships.⁠9 62% of young adolescents (12-14) know peers who have been verbally abused by an intimate partner.⁠10 About one in every three teenagers will experience emotional abuse in high school. Psychological abuse is able to reach all teenagers and is an overwhelming issue in many high schools and middle schools. While developing the first years of relationships, teens often learn how to behave in relationships from parents, peers, and media. Unfortunately emotional abuse is becoming a greater and greater phenomenon in pop culture. Through normalizing the behaviors of characters in book such as “Twilight” and “50 Shades of Gray” partners learn to behave in a way that is being indoctrinated as romantic, but in actuality is damaging. With our society continuing to romanticize the experiences of the abused, it is harder to determine characteristics of an emotionally healthy relationship. Such excuses still do not release an abuser from their harms. Any relationship rooted in mutual respect will be able to circumvent such circumstances. Ultimately, emotional abuse comes from the abuser gaining gratification from control and considering their lives to be more important than the victims. Often times they try to demonstrate to the victim they are smarter, have more friends, or are better than the victim in order to extinguish their own insecurities. This gratuitous behavior only leads to incomparable harm to the victim.

As teens develop emotionally, they are heavily influenced by experiences in their relationships. Thus, the teenage victim of a bad relationship is more likely to experience depression and anxiety, 50% of emotionally abused victims have considered suicide, are 32% more likely to engage in risky behaviors such ad dugs and alcohol and are 67% more likely to engage in anti social behaviors.⁠11 Emotional abuse is difficult to recognize because abusers are likely to appear charming or deceptive and often suffer from disorders such as borderline personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, and antisocial personality. Because of this deception recognizing red flags of abusive partners is much harder to detect but is all the more essential. Victims may display signs of disconnection in friends or disinterest in activates they used to enjoy, and victims may suffer from mood swings or appear unstable around friends, victims are likely to be highly anxious and defensive when on the topic of their partner so it is important to remain vigilant. Emotional abuse effect girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest rate of intimate partner violence — almost triple the national average.⁠12 This disproportionate amount is very discomforting. Often women, and especially young women, are perceived by society to be over emotional and irrational. This is a stigma that goes to perpetuate instances of abuse and discredits claims to abuse by young women so they are often ignored or deterred from reporting cases of psychological abuse. Addressing this falsehood and rejecting the popular perception of emotional young women would go along way to combat the discrepancies in emotional abuse statistics.

**Conclusion**

Domestic abuse happens on a verity of levels and through a variety of mediums. Often times our culture disparages abuse that more commonly affects adolescents, the effects of this abuse will go on to follow the generation into adulthood. Our romanization of abusive relationships in books and movies ultimately adds up to affirm the actions of the abuser a serves to clear them from any wrongdoing. Our largest impediment however, is our failure to simply take teenage girls seriously. Our ignorant society gains a lot from ignoring the concerns and problems teenage girls are facing. Common stereotypes, dichotomies, and stigmas all serve to discredit the voices of young girls and ultimately attempt to cover any serious harm we are causing.

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6 Types of Abuse – www.loveisrespect.org (wwwloveisrespectorg)

7 Jay G. Silverman, PhD; Anita Raj, PhD; Lorelei A. Mucci, MPH; Jeanne E. Hathaway, MD, MPH, *Dating Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Associated Substance Use, Unhealthy Weight Control, Sexual Risk Behavior, Pregnancy, and Suicidality* (*JAMA.*2001)

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