

Unhealthy Relationships

Not all relationships are healthy. This section can help you determine if you or a friend are in an unhealthy or abusive relationship.

- Danger Signs of an Unhealthy Relationship
- Red Lights
- Forms of Abuse
- Dating Violence Cycle
- Myths of Dating Violence
- Abusive Romantic Relationship

Danger Signs of an Abusive Relationship

Sometimes relationships don't work out. The danger signs of an unhealthy relationship should be easily recognizable:

- Lack of talking
- No communication
- Inability to listen
- No trust
- Jealousy
- No balance
- Lack of respect

Red Lights of an Abusive Relationship

Does the other person in the relationship:

- Put you down?
- Get extremely jealous or possessive?
- Constantly check up on you?
- Tell you how to dress?
- Try to control what you do and who you see?
- Have big mood swings?
- Make you feel nervous (like you are walking on eggshells)?
- Criticize you?
- Threaten to hurt you?

Abuse always escalates, and it rarely gets better. If you experience any of these things, you may be involved in an unhealthy relationship.

Knowing these warning signs can help act as "red lights" in your relationship. You can stop and figure out if your relationship is abusive before things get out of control.

Not all of these signs will be in every abusive relationship. If one or more of these warning signs exist in your relationship, **it doesn't necessarily mean that your relationship is abusive**, but your relationship may not be as healthy as you deserve it to be.

Types of Abuse

Abuse can come in many forms – verbal, physical, sexual, or emotional. Many abusive relationships have more than one type of abuse, and none of them should be tolerated.

- Sexual Abuse
- Emotional & Verbal Abuse
- Physical Abuse

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is when someone forces you into **unwanted sexual activity**, especially through threats or coercion.

In a healthy sexual relationship, you shouldn't feel threatened, pressured, or uncomfortable with your partner. If you feel these negative emotions, it is likely that you are being abused.

Emotional & Verbal Abuse

Emotional and verbal abuse are somewhat more difficult to define. These types of abuse often involve angry outbursts, withholding of emotional responses, manipulative coercion, or unreasonable demands. **Verbal abuse** is often insulting and humiliating, with the abuser making fun of or ridiculing the target.

Emotional abuse often includes verbal abuse. It also involves the abuser taking complete control over the life of the person she or he is abusing, often by making threats or otherwise manipulating that person.

Those who are being emotionally or verbally abused are often made to feel that their perception of reality is incorrect and that their feelings are wrong and unimportant.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse occurs when someone physically hurts you, such as by hitting you or throwing something at you. Even if someone only hits you once or doesn't hurt you that badly, **it is a big deal.**

Abuse tends to escalate, putting you at greater risk in the future. Just one incident of being physically hurt by your partner is unacceptable, and you should take steps to stop the abuse.

Dating Violence & Abuse

Although many people assume that they will never have to face being in an abusive relationship, one in three teen relationships involves violence.

Almost none of these teens tell their parents, and most teens in abusive relationships don't know where to seek help. **Abuse affects people of every gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and nationality.**

It is a way of controlling another person, and even abuse that doesn't leave physical marks can have profound emotional consequences and put the person being abused in danger.

Adolescents and adults are often unaware about how regularly dating abuse occurs. Here are some statistics about dating abuse and how common it is:

- One study by *Choose Respect* found that one in four adolescents reports verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse each year.
- Recent studies shows that one third of teens experience some form of abuse in dating relationships.
- More than half of the teens surveyed know of someone who has been abused.

Especially because of these kinds of statistics, it is very important to recognize the danger signs of an abusive relationship so that you can make sure you get out as soon as possible.

Dating Violence Cycle

What exactly is the dating violence cycle? It includes:

- **Tension** – such as criticism, yelling, swearing, angry gestures, coercion, or threats
- **Violence** – such as physical and sexual attacks or threats
- **Seduction** – such as apologies, promises to change, or gifts

Jealousy and possessiveness are two of the most common warning signs of dating abuse. Abusers use them to control the other person's behavior.

The elements listed below can keep the cycle in motion.

- **Love for the abuser:** Believing that the relationship is not entirely bad
- **Hope:** Thinking things will change or it's just a phase
- **Fear:** Worrying that threats will become a reality, resulting in fear of ending the relationship

Myths of Dating Violence

Many people in abusive relationships are in denial.

They cling to the myth:

- **That their partner will never do it again.** Saying he or she will never do it again is futile because violence is a pattern of behaviors. Rarely does someone abuse their partner only once.
- **That they are not being abused.** Dating abuse does include physical and sexual violence. But it also can include emotional and verbal abuse – which includes put-downs, insults, and threats. For more information, see our article about the forms of relationship abuse.
- **That they will leave when the time is right.** People stay in abusive relationships for a variety of reasons. These include fear of being alone, emotional dependence, confusion, low self-esteem, not realizing that it's abuse, or a belief that the abuser will change.
- **That it only happens to girls.** Males can also be victims in controlling and abusive relationships. They can be embarrassed to confess that they are being abused because they, the abuser, and other people sometimes have a bias that "only females are abused."

Abusive Romantic Relationships

If you are in a relationship, look at the list below and see how many of the items apply to your and/or your partner. If two or more items apply to your relationship, you could be in an abusive relationship – or you could potentially be in a relationship that may become abusive.

Characteristics of Your Partner

Are you going out with someone who:

- Is jealous and possessive; won't let you have friends; checks up on you and won't accept breaking up?
- Tries to control you by being bossy, giving orders, making all the decisions, and not taking your opinions seriously?
- Puts you down in front of friends or tells you that you would be nothing without him or her?
- Scares you?
- Makes you worry about his or her reactions to things you say or do?
- Threatens you?
- Uses or owns guns or other weapons?
- Is violent?
- Has a history of fighting, losing his or her temper quickly or bragging about mistreating others?
- Grabs, pushes, shoves, or hits you?
- Pressures you for sex or is forceful or scary about sex?
- Gets too serious about the relationship too fast?
- Abuses alcohol and/or other drugs and pressures you to take them?
- Has a history of failed relationships and blames the other person for all the problems?
- Makes your family and friends uneasy and concerned for your safety?
- Makes you feel like you need to apologize to yourself or others for his or her behavior when he or she treats you badly?

Initial Signs of an Abusive Relationship

Sometimes, the initial signs of an abusive relationship are **not obvious**. You may be worried about a friend but not see any actual signs of abuse. Instead, you might ask yourself the following questions about your friend's relationship.

If you answer yes to two or more of these questions, check out the section on talking to a friend (found on this page), as your friend may be in an abusive relationship.

- Does your friend show physical signs of injury?
- Is he or she doing worse in school, or has dropped out completely?
- Has he or she changed his or her personal style?
- Has he or she lost confidence, and does he or she have difficulty making decisions?
- Has he or she quit his or her normal after-school activities?

- Has he or she started using drugs or alcohol?
- Does he or she have mood swings or emotional outbursts?
- Has he or she isolated himself or herself from friends and family?
- Has she become pregnant?
- Does he or she apologize for his or her significant other's abusive behavior?
- Does he or she seem overly worried about upsetting or angering his or her significant other?

Risks of an Abusive Relationship

Once you recognize that you're in an abusive relationship, it can be difficult to determine what to do next. Depending on how long the abuse has been going on, **you may feel isolated from your old friends and unable to turn to anyone for help.** However, there are resources available.

The first thing you need to think about when you realize that your relationship is abusive is how to get out of the relationship. Abuse tends to escalate, so **the longer you remain in the relationship, the more you are in danger.**

Being in an abusive relationship also has serious consequences for your mental and physical health. The list below includes some of those risks.

- Loss of appetite
- Headaches
- Nervousness
- Weight loss
- Bruises or broken bones
- Sadness
- Self-blame
- Confusion
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Shame
- Mistrust of self
- Mistrust of others
- Depression
- Fear
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Terror
- Permanent injury

How do you end abuse?

Ending an abusive relationship can also put you in danger, however, so it's important to turn to a trusted adult or friend for assistance first. Your parents, teachers, religious leaders, or a school counselor may be able to help you with this process. Find someone you trust and talk to them about what has been happening.

When you end the relationship, do so in a place where there are other people so that your abuser cannot further abuse you, or end the relationship over the phone or via e-mail. Let the adult you've talked to know when you're going to end it so she or he can support you before and after the breakup.

Sometimes an abuser will say that you somehow caused the abuse. Don't be swayed by this. No matter what happened in your relationship, you did not cause the abuse. **No one asks to be abused; the abuser chose to abuse you.** Everyone chooses how to respond to other people's actions, and abuse is never an appropriate response.

Abusers may also promise to change. But that does not necessarily mean he or she will change in reality. You should be aware of the cycle of abuse.

After the abuse, many abusers will give their partners presents and promise that the abuse will never happen again. However, after these presents and promises, tension often begins to build again, and at some point, the abuser again hurts his or her partner.

Promises that the abuse will stop are simply a stage in the cycle. Abusers can change, but it takes a lot of hard work and counseling to create these changes. It isn't worth it to remain in the relationship while the abuser works out the personal problems that are causing the abuse.

Abuse by an Adult

Unfortunately, many cases of abuse involve an adult abusing a teen or child. If an adult abuses you, find another adult you can trust and tell them what has happened. No one has the right to hit you or to touch you sexually against your wishes.

Just because someone is an adult or has authority over you does not mean that they have the right to abuse you in any way. If an adult does abuse you, remember that it is not your fault, and you did not do anything to deserve the abuse.

Almost any adult who hears a teen say he or she was abused will listen, but if the first person you

talk to doesn't believe what you say, **keep telling people until someone does!**

School counselors are often trained to deal with these issues, so if you don't feel comfortable going to a parent or if a parent is abusing you, a counselor might be someone you feel comfortable turning to.

Healing and Self-Care

In an abusive situation, you can be hurt in a variety of ways. Some of these ways are physical and may need physical treatment, but many of them are psychological and social. You may have lower self-esteem because of the abuse or have worries about the possibility of future abuse.

Sometimes people who have been abused find it hard to trust others because their trust has been betrayed by someone close to them. Talking to a counselor can be very helpful for sorting out your feelings after the abuse has ended or for determining how to end the abuse.

You might also worry about your safety after you end a relationship with the abuser. If the abuser continues to call or e-mail you, you could try having your parents screen the call or block the e-mail address.

In some serious cases, you might consider getting a restraining order, which is an official legal document to prevent the abuser from contacting you again. The easiest way to do this is to talk to a trusted adult who can help you through the process.

If you are in school with your abuser and find it difficult to be in the same class or are placed in a group with him or her, you could speak to the teacher or principal or have a parent call the school.

Remember that you have the right to be free of abuse!

Another issue that sometimes occurs after an abusive relationship ends is feeling isolated from former friends. **One tactic of an abuser is to isolate his or her partner from previous friends and acquaintances.** When the relationship ends, you may feel that you've lost your former place.

Sometimes it can help to join clubs or extracurricular activities; these help keep you busy and can be a source of new friends. You might also try talking to some of your old friends and explaining as much about the situation as you feel comfortable. Many of them will probably be understanding, and they can provide much needed support in the time after your breakup.

Helping a Friend

If you believe that a friend is in an abusive situation, you may not know how to help. If the friend hasn't told you that the situation is abusive, try asking him or her directly, and talking to her or him about different forms of abuse.

There may be an innocent explanation for what you have observed, but it is also possible that your friend hasn't known how to talk about what's happening and needs support.

Warning Signs

What about if you suspect that a friend is in an unhealthy relationship? How would that friend act? Ask yourself if your friend:

- Constantly cancels plans for reasons that don't sound true
- Always worries about making his or her boyfriend or girlfriend angry
- Apologizes for his or her significant other's abusive behavior?
- Seems overly worried about upsetting or angering his or her significant other?
- Gives up things that are important?
- Shows signs of physical abuse, like bruises or cuts?
- Tells you that he or she gets pressured into having sex, or talks about feeling like a sex object?
- Has a boyfriend or girlfriend that wants his or her significant other to be available all the time?
- Has become isolated from friends or family?

Helping Your Friend Cope

If a friend confides in you about abuse, **the most important thing is to listen and be supportive.** Listen to your friend without judging him or her. Remember that the abuse is not your friend's fault.

Try to help him or her leave the abusive relationship. Sometimes an abuser will try to isolate his or her target from friends, but try to keep your connection with your friend. **This connection may be the first step towards getting out of the relationship,** and it can be vital for your friend's safety.

Below are some suggestions for helping a friend deal with an unhealthy or violent relationship:

- Help your friend recognize that feeling bad about himself or herself is not normal and that he or she deserves a healthy, non-violent relationship.
- Encourage his or her strength and courage.
- Do not make your friend feel bad for his or her choices – even if you think these choices are wrong.
- Offer to go with your friend to find a counselor or support group, or to talk to his or her family, friends, or a teacher.
- Remember that **you cannot rescue them**.

Your friend may ask you to keep the abuse a secret, but – for her or his safety – **it is very important to talk to a trusted adult**. It is important to respect your friend's privacy by not telling other friends and acquaintances, but you should tell an adult.

Even if the abuse seems minor, remember that abuse escalates; telling an adult now may save your friend from a dangerous situation in the future. Although your friend may be upset at first that you let an adult know about the abuse, protecting his or her safety is the most important thing you can do as a friend.

What can I do about abusive relationships?

If you are being abused, you should consider how much you care about the relationship. If you really care about the relationship, try to work it out before you end it. Maybe you should spend some time apart, and then figure out what went wrong after you have cooled off.

However, if the relationship is violent, it will be better to end it now. Reporting physical abuse can help protect you in case the abuser pursues you after you leave the relationship.

If a friend is in an unhealthy relationship: talk to him or her, explain why you think it is harmful, and offer to help him or her get help. There are also hotlines, Internet sites, and counsellors dedicated to offering teens advice and support.