

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT WILMINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES
COM 223
Mediation and Conflict Management

Dating Violence and Acquaintance Assault

Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist, Nebraska Cooperative Extension, reports that dating violence and acquaintance assault happens more frequently than most people think. Sexual assault is defined as sexual penetration by use or threat of force.

- One out of every six women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape. More than half young women raped (68 percent) knew their rapist either as a boyfriend, friend or casual acquaintance.
- Up to one-third of young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 have reported being involved in at least one abusive dating situation.
- Date rapes, which account for 60 percent of all rapes, are not usually committed by a stranger late at night. The assailant may be a friend, lover, boyfriend, classmate, coworker or even a family member. Six out of 10 rapes of young women occur in their own home or a friend or relative's home, not in a dark alley.
- More than 80 percent of all sexual assaults occur between people who know each other.
- A survey of adolescent and college students revealed that date rape accounted for 67 percent of sexual assaults. These assaults happen on dates, in people's homes, at parties and in the daylight hours as well as at night.
- Nearly 1 in 3 adult women experience at least 1 physical assault by a partner during adulthood.

Sexual assault by an acquaintance can be more traumatizing than assault by a stranger. First of all, it represents a violation of trust. Secondly, victims may not get the social support they need and deserve. While people are likely to believe victims of stranger assault, they may refuse to believe an account of an assault by an acquaintance. Friends may say the victim is to blame. Friends may not be there for the victim, or worse, they may take sides with the assailant.

The reason this happens is complicated. To friends, acquaintance sexual assault may be more threatening than assault by a stranger. It suggests to them that they are too vulnerable, and that this could happen to them. By suggesting that the victim, not the assailant is to blame, they protect themselves from sharing the victim's vulnerability.

Because acquaintance sexual assault shatters trust and can lead to alienation from support systems, victims often turn to substance abuse and attempts at suicide, or become chronically depressed, angry or anxious. Victims may also develop eating disorders and other self-abusive behaviors.

The Bureau of Justice Special Report: Intimate Partner Violence, May 2000, contains the following information:

- Women ages 16 to 24 experience the highest per capita rates of intimate violence--nearly 20 per 1000 women.
- More than 4 in every 10 incidents of domestic violence involve non-married persons.
- In 1995, 7 percent of all murder victims were young women who were killed by their boyfriends.
- One of five college females will experience some form of dating violence.
- A survey of 500 young women, ages 15 to 24, found that 60 percent were currently involved in an ongoing abusive relationship and all participants had experienced violence in a dating relationship.
- Women whose partners verbally abused them, were jealous or possessive, or denied them access to family and friends were significantly more likely to report being raped, physically assaulted, and/or stalked by their partners.
- It is estimated that 503,485 women are stalked by an intimate partner each year.
- Many women in violent relationships are victims of systematic terrorism; that is, they experience multiple forms of abuse and control at the hands of their partners.

A research study by Frinter and Robinson (1993) strongly implicated alcohol, fraternity membership, and athletes, in acquaintance rape at a large Midwestern university. The following results came from 925 women between the ages of 18 and 21:

- 27.1 percent of the college women had experienced sexual assault, attempted sexual assault, or sexual abuse without penetration; or had been subjected to battery, illegal restraint, or intimidation.
- 82.7 percent of the women said the assault had been committed by someone they knew. Most of these incidents took place during the women's freshman year, when the victims were between 18 and 19 years old.
- 55.3 percent of the women and 67.5 percent of the male offenders had been drinking at the time of the incident.
- 47.6 percent of the male perpetrators of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault were in a fraternity, although only 25 percent of the men on campus belong to fraternities.
- 20.2 percent of the male perpetrators were members of a sports team or club, although fewer than 2 percent of men on campus belonged to an athletic organization.

Reducing the likelihood of being victimized during a dating relationship

- **Communicate Expectations.** You have the right to set limits about what is welcome behavior. Communicate these expectations both verbally and nonverbally.
- **Equalize Your Relationships.** Be aware of how sex-role stereotypes that encourage men to be in control and encourage women to be passive can set you up for acquaintance assault. Exercise your right to be in charge.
- **Trust your intuition.** Pay attention to behavior that doesn't seem right. If something feels wrong, threatening, or dangerous, it probably is. If you find yourself in a vulnerable or uncomfortable situation, take action. Your immediate action should be to leave before the situation becomes one that you can not control.

Be aware of individuals who:

- ✓ Ignore your wishes
- ✓ Attempt to make you feel guilty or accuse you of being "uptight"
- ✓ Act excessively jealous or possessive
- ✓ Ignore your personal boundaries
- ✓ Do not listen, or disregard what you are saying
- ✓ Are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs
- ✓ Get hostile when you say, "No"

Early warning signs that your date may eventually become abusive

- Extreme jealousy
- Controlling behavior
- Quick involvement
- Unpredictable mood swings
- Alcohol and drug use
- Explosive anger
- Isolates you from friends and family
- Uses force during an argument
- Shows hypersensitivity
- Believes in rigid sex roles
- Blames others for his problems or feelings
- Cruel to animals or children
- Verbally abusive
- Abused former partners
- Threatens violence

What appears as harmless behavior may be identified as the early warning signs of future abuse. If you feel a twinge of uneasiness, stop, look, and listen! If you have an idea that your love for each other, and or marriage, will solve the problem, *forget it!* Physical abuse during courtship is usually a guarantee of further abuse after marriage.

Recognizing a Potential Abuser in a Dating Relationship

During the early stages of these relationships, the violence is not necessarily severe. It often appears in the form of intimidation, coercion or threat. However, it is very likely the violence will escalate — increasing in intensity, duration and severity over time. Most, but not all, dating violence and sexual assault is perpetrated by men against women. Therefore, Lingren uses the term "he" to refer to the potential perpetrator. Here are some warning signs that might signal potential verbal, physical or sexual abuse:

- Does he lose his temper frequently and more easily than seems necessary?
- Does he abuse alcohol or other drugs?
- Does he commit acts of violence against objects and things rather than people?
- Does he show extreme jealousy?
- Does he become enraged when you won't listen to his opinion or advice?
- Does he expect you to spend all your time with him or inform him of your whereabouts?
- Does he tell you how to dress, how to wear your hair and/or makeup?
- Does he follow you?
- Is he always watching you to see where you are, what you are doing, who you are talking to?
- Has he ever slapped you, pulled your hair, twisted your wrist, arm or fingers, jabbed you in the ribs, pushed or shoved you, slapped, hit or knocked you around?
- Is he being physically or verbally abused at home, or is his parents' relationship physically violent?

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