



Healing from Abusive Relationships

For Teens & Young Adults



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Introduction

Relationships are so important to our lives, whether with your friends, someone you are dating, a person you're hanging out with, or with parents or teachers. Healthy relationships create a sense of belonging, bring out the best in you, and make you feel confident and supported. In healthy relationships we typically feel good, trust each other, and look forward to being together. It is also important to understand that relationships require maintaining healthy boundaries and negotiation.

Unfortunately, some relationships are not healthy and are sometimes even abusive. In fact, about 25% of young people will experience some form of abuse by the time they graduate from high school. While girls and young people who are transgender or gender nonconforming experience higher rates of abuse, anyone — regardless of gender — can be the target of abuse or engage in abusive behavior.

Is your relationship making you feel unsafe, sad, scared, or devalued? If so, it's not healthy for you.

Signs of an Unhealthy or Abusive Relationship

People who are abusive commonly do not accept responsibility, so blaming the person they harm becomes part of the abuse. A person experiencing abuse may have difficulty realizing they are in an abusive relationship. Here are some examples of abusive behaviors:

Emotional Abuse

- Makes fun of you, calls you names, criticizes or ridicules you, especially in front of others.
- Doesn't let you hang out or talk with friends and family, gets angry when you see your friends or family, or shows up uninvited when you are with friends or family.
- Blames you for everything, makes you feel unsafe or afraid to tell the truth.
- Not respectful of boundaries, engages in gaslighting or peer pressure.
- Threatens to "out" you or share information with others to harm you or change their perception of you.
- Goes through your things, acts jealous, or accuses you of cheating.
- Threatens suicide or to hurt themselves, you, pets, or someone you care about.



Technological Abuse

- Controls who you can or can't be friends with on social media.
- Makes insulting or threatening social media posts
- Uses Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, TikTok, and other apps to monitor you or puts you down in their social media posts.
- Sends you unwanted naked pictures without your consent or demands you send them.
- Steals or demands passwords to your phone or online accounts.
- Constantly texts you or makes you feel like you can't be separated from your phone for fear of the consequence.
- Looks through your phone frequently and looks at your pictures, texts, and call history.

Physical Abuse

- Shakes, grabs you, or pulls your hair when you don't want them to.
- Slaps, punches, or kicks you.
- Uses objects to hurt you.
- Restrains you or doesn't let you leave a particular area.
- Attempts to, or actually strangles you or puts pressure on your chest or throat.

Sexual Abuse

- Touches or kisses you without your consent.
- Pressures, manipulates, or forces you to engage in any unwanted sexual activity.
- Prevents you from using birth control or refuses to use birth control themselves.





Specific Communities

Many groups of people experience discrimination and unfair treatment based on their identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, or disability. If you identify with one or more of these communities, you may experience specific forms of abuse and experience additional fears and concerns.

If you identify with a historically marginalized community, seek out friends or a trusted adult in your community who can help you find resources that feel safe to you.

Queer, Trans, or Gender Nonconforming Youth

If you identify as LGBTQ or Queer and/or Trans, you may fear “being outed” by your partner if you’re not out to everyone. You may also fear that seeking help will make you a target of harassment or bullying. Your fears are legitimate and valid.

Your abusive partner may exploit these fears to isolate you and keep you in the relationship. And if your family, school, or community are hostile to your sexuality and/or gender identity, this can also be a barrier in asking for help.

Reach out to LGBTQ organizations or school clubs like a Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) or a Queer-Straight Alliance (QSA), to find queer and trans resources. You may also find a supportive counselor or teacher who can help you find resources that will be helpful to you.

Youth with Undocumented Status or Dreamers

If you are undocumented or a Dreamer, your partner may tell you that calling the police for help will result in you being deported. An abusive partner may also threaten to call ICE if you leave them or if you tell someone about your abuse. You may fear telling a school staff member or other community member out of concern your information may lead to an investigation that could ultimately lead to the deportation of you, your family, or your abusive partner.

Heightened immigration enforcement policies have justifiably increased fear for non-citizens to contact law enforcement. If you do not have immigration status or are a Dreamer in the United States, contact an attorney, or someone who is licensed to better understand the implications of your status when looking to get help with an abusive relationship.





Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Communities of Color

You may experience an increased impact of the abusive relationship because of the everyday stress of being a person of color. White supremacy is a specific set of beliefs that is reinforced by systems and institutions. These beliefs and institutions are deeply rooted in this country's roots — from the very beginning with the genocide and displacement of Indigenous peoples, and the enslavement of African peoples.

You may have legitimate reasons to fear reaching out for help from the criminal legal system or other systems because of historic and ongoing oppression against your community. Find trusted adults in your community who can help you find resources that will be helpful to you.

Youth with Disabilities

If you identify as a person with a physical, mental, cognitive or intellectual disability, you may depend on others to meet some or many of your basic needs or use assistive devices. You may have had your daily needs or assistive technology used against you to control you.

You may feel shame from trusting the person who is abusing you or complying with requests from your partner that made you uncomfortable. These feelings are valid. All people deserve to feel valued and safe. You may have difficulty in finding help based on stereotypes that individuals with disabilities do not have dating relationships.

Find trusted adults in disability advocacy organizations, like an independent living center or protection and advocacy organization. Finding an advocate who will support your self-determination and enhance your safety is possible.





Tell Someone About the Abusive Relationship

While it can be hard to do, telling someone about what is happening to you is courageous. It is also an act of self-love and self preservation. Talking about your relationship might feel embarrassing or awkward; preparing what you'll say can help if you are struggling to describe what you are feeling. Think of the main things you want to tell someone you trust. It might be helpful to practice saying those things in your head or even practice aloud when you're alone. An alternative may be to write down what you're experiencing and sharing that letter with someone. Make sure to keep your journals or letters where they are safe from your abusive partner. When you're ready, tell someone you trust and keep talking until you receive the help that you need.

Your friends may be great to confide in, but this depends on your situation. If you're being abused, consider telling a trusted adult such as a parent or family member, teacher, counselor, or school nurse. If the person you confide in questions your experience or doesn't believe you, do not be discouraged. Seek another trusted adult to tell.

You may also feel comfortable talking to an advocate at a community or tribal domestic and/or sexual violence program or a professional social worker, counselor, or physician. Depending on the state, some professionals are mandated (required by law) to report physical and sexual abuse of anyone under 18 to authorities, such as law enforcement or child protective services. Be sure to ask the adult you choose if they are a mandated reporter and what the impact of you sharing with them would be.





What About Your Relationship?

If you're in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, figuring out the next steps can be hard. You may still have feelings for this person and have a history with them. It can be confusing and difficult to navigate.

Staying Together

If you decide to stay together, make sure you are honest with yourself about your decision. While an unhealthy relationship has the potential to heal and become healthy with enough time and interventions, it may be unrealistic to expect to "fix" an abusive relationship. Remember, at the end of the day, you can only change your own behavior, not your partner's.

Breaking Up

Listen to your instincts. If you feel afraid, you probably have a good reason and should have support from a trusted adult when you break up with an abusive partner. Additionally, your abusive partner may not accept the break up or respect your boundaries.

If you're thinking of ending your relationship, consider these tips:

- If you don't feel safe, don't break up in person. It may seem mean to break up over the phone or by text, but it may be the safest way. Consider blocking their phone number afterwards to maintain space if they will not leave you alone.
- If you break up in person, do it in a public place. Have friends or your parents wait nearby. Take a cell phone with you.
- Don't try to explain your reasons for ending the relationship more than once. There is nothing you can say that will make your abusive partner happy with your decision.
- Let your friends and parents know you are ending your relationship, especially if you think your partner will try to find you and confront you when you're alone.





Safety Planning Process

While no one can control another person's behavior, there are ways to increase your safety. One way is to engage in safety planning. Safety planning is possible whether you decide to end the relationship or not. Safety planning is a process to help you think of ways to lower your risk of being harmed. You can download a safety planning guide at www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/Teen-Safety-Plan.pdf



Here are some options to consider:

- If you and your partner go to the same school, you may be able to adjust your class schedule or find other ways to feel safer. Talk to a school counselor or teacher you trust.
- Avoid isolated areas at school and local hangouts. Don't walk alone or wear headphones.
- Keep friends or family close when attending parties or events. It might be helpful to have 2 or 3 ways to safely leave the gathering.
- Save any threatening or harassing messages. Set your profile to private on social networking sites and ask friends to not share photos of you or disclose your location without your consent.
- Change the passwords on your social media and other online accounts.
- Memorize important contacts' phone numbers just in case you are separated from your phone or your phone does not work.



Legal Options

If you are under 18, mandatory reporting laws in your state may require any person — such as doctors, teachers, or counselors — to report if you have been abused. You should know this going forward because a person may feel forced to report what you tell them to a policing agency or another agency. It is okay for you to ask if someone plans on talking to the police before you share your story or experience.

Reporting to School or Criminal Legal System

This section will help you explore and think about your options if you choose to report to your school, college or a policing agency regarding the abuse in your relationship. It is important that you weigh your options and make the choice that is best for you. For some people, reporting to the school or to a policing agency is a very empowering experience, but unfortunately for others it is not.

You will have to share what happened and it is important to understand this before going in. Sharing your experience of the abuse is a very personal thing, and if you choose to report the abuse you will be asked to talk about it in detail many times to a number of different people. This can be re-traumatizing. It might be helpful to seek a counselor or a professional to support you through this process.

You might feel a loss of control and this can be triggering. Not everyone finds reporting to be empowering, some feel a loss of control because decisions about what happens with their information are made for them.

Having an advocate help you during the process can help you regain control in this confusing process, since they have a better understanding of the system and can explain it to you. The criminal legal process can be long and drawn out. Unfortunately, you will not have much control over the events or the outcome.

School-based Reporting Options

You have the option to report the abuse to your school or college. Schools that receive money from the federal government (almost every school) are required under Title IX to ensure an environment free from sex and gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence. Generally speaking, schools are legally required to make sure that individuals who experience violence in relationships can continue their education. You have a right to stay in school even if you're experiencing an abusive relationship.

Examples of options a school or college may offer to someone who is in an abusive relationship include academic accommodations or schedule changes, school-based no contact orders, dorm and class transfers, and





mental health support. Regardless of whether you report the assault to law enforcement, your school should take its own actions, including a thorough and impartial investigation, which may result in possible suspension or expulsion of the partner who was abusive. If your school does not take the abuse seriously or is not responding, consider seeking help from a trusted adult to contact an attorney.

Criminal Reporting Options

You also have the option to file a police report. The length of time that passed since the abuse may guide what happens when you contact the police. If you report the abuse to law enforcement, you may be assigned a victim witness coordinator who works for the prosecutor's office. A victim witness coordinator is supposed to assist you through the criminal legal process. The goal is for the coordinator to make a confusing legal process clearer, to lessen your exposure to re-victimization, and connect you to community resources. However, as employees of the criminal legal system, victim witness coordinators have limits on confidentiality. They may be required to share information you tell them with others, such as a police officer, detective, or prosecutor, who may be required to provide the information to the defense attorney who is representing the person

who abused you. That means the abusive partner will also hear about the statements you made to the victim witness coordinator. After the police investigation, the prosecutor in the location where the crime occurred gets to decide whether or not to file criminal charges.

Civil & Criminal Orders of Protection

The civil and criminal legal systems have two types of orders. A community or tribal domestic violence program advocate may be able to help you decide if you want to access either process.

Civil Protection Orders (CPO) – A civil protection order is a document from a judge that tells one person to stay away from another person's home, school, or workplace. The order may also ban calling or texting. Most states have options for minors in an abusive relationship to file a petition for a civil protection order. There is no cost to file the petition and you do not need an attorney. The paperwork for a civil protection order is available at your local court clerk's office in the courthouse. If a person violates a civil protection order they may be arrested and criminally charged.

Criminal No Contact Orders (NCO) – If there is an ongoing criminal case regarding abuse in your relationship, the judge will usually issue a no contact order requiring that the person causing harm (the defendant





in a case) to stay away from and not harass the person experiencing the violence. You can ask the court to modify or terminate an order, but a judge may or may not agree to that change. Generally, NCOs are only valid as long as a case is ongoing (so if the charges are dropped, the order ends).

It is possible that not everyone will believe what happened to you.

People will question your experience or may try to blame you. Be mindful that the legal system cannot guarantee that a person who has harmed you can be found guilty or convicted. It's important to consider that what you need may not be something that the criminal legal system can provide.

How Did This Happen to Me?

It is common to blame yourself for the abuse in your relationship, even though it is not your fault. You may be wondering about your own actions — could you have done something differently that would have prevented the abuse from happening?

Emotions can feel intense in relationships. It can feel like your whole life and wellbeing revolves around your partner, which is both exciting and overwhelming. Sometimes these intense feelings make it hard to recognize abusive behaviors. Abuse in relationships often begins with behaviors that can be easily explained or down played such as name-calling, threats, jealousy, or distrust.

Over time, abusive and controlling behaviors may get worse or more frequent and the abusive partner often apologizes or promises to change. You may experience a range of emotions in abusive relationships. One sign of an abusive relationship is experiencing very high highs and very low lows. There is a myth that for abusive relationships to exist, that abuse has to happen all the time. It's important to realize that abusive relationships can often have both highs and lows.





You might also feel like it's your responsibility to "fix" the relationship, change who you are, or give up part of yourself to make the relationship work.

You may even blame yourself — "they didn't mean it," "I don't want them to get into trouble," "I am the one responsible for their abusive behavior."

Maybe you're worried your friends will blame you or won't believe you. Or you're not sure if the behavior is unhealthy or abusive because you know and trust the person and it doesn't happen all the time. It can be hard for people to understand that the person who is harming you isn't always abusive, and that the times when they aren't make it hard to end the relationship. The bottom line — you are not responsible for the abuse.

What You Can Do for You

Abusive relationships can affect different parts of your life. Self-care allows you to respond to stress by addressing your emotional and physical needs. Practicing daily self-care is an important step you can take for your health and well-being.

Here are some ways of self-care and self preservation:

Kindness – Be compassionate with yourself. In times of stress or trauma, it is not unusual for people to be emotionally violent towards themselves. If you can, validate your emotional and physical needs.

Rest – Try to sleep 6 to 8 hours each night. Sleep may be difficult, especially in times of high stress. If you can, rest when you are tired.

Breathe – Practice breathing deeply, low and s-l-o-w. Try to take three low and s-l-o-w breaths, from down in your belly button. Slowly raise your arms on the inhale and lower your arms on the exhale. When you are beginning to feel tense, breathing can help.





Water – Drink water and stay hydrated throughout the day. This can help your body carry out normal functions and flush out stress hormones.

Support – Spend time with friends and family who accept and support you and make you happy.

Spaciousness – Give yourself time to rest, and plan to give yourself more time to do normal tasks than you usually do.

Joy – Schedule time to do things that bring you joy, happiness, or wholeness! Ride a bike! Read a book! Joy is important to healing, and is a revolutionary practice!

Support a Friend in an Abusive Relationship

When someone is abused or sexually assaulted, they usually tell a friend first, if they tell anyone. Sometimes they won't say anything, but you may notice something is wrong and be worried about them. Everyone has a different response to trauma.

Here are a few suggestions to help a friend:

Start the Conversation – Thank your friend for trusting you in sharing what they are experiencing. Trauma can impact people's decision making and can make it difficult for someone to ask for help. Assure your friend that you believe them and care about them, and understand that they may not want to talk about the abuse.

Share Your Concern – Have conversations from a place of concern. Avoid judgment or lecturing. Let your friend know what you've noticed and don't be afraid to tell them you're worried. Be sure your friend knows that everyone deserves to feel safe and valued. Harm is never the fault of the person experiencing the harm.

Listen and Be Supportive – Ask them to share anything they feel comfortable sharing. Really listen, so that you can show up for them. Do not pry or pressure your friend in sharing things that they are not ready to share. Let your friend talk about the abuse or sexual assault in the way that



they need to. Make them feel safe with you as the person they choose to talk to and give them time to share their experience. Know your friend may not recognize the abuse (which may happen through texts, on the phone, or online). They might be afraid or embarrassed to talk about a sexual assault, or may be confused about what happened to them.

Understand that your friend may not realize that coerced sex (when someone manipulates, tricks, or guilties a person into sex) is sexual assault. If your friend didn't want it to happen, then it shouldn't have. If your friend was sexually assaulted, encourage them to seek immediate medical treatment.

Things to Say – Encourage your friend to get help from a trusted adult, and help them connect to the resources they need. Don't judge your friend. Here are examples of things to say:

- "I'm here for you."
- "I'm sorry this happened to you. No one deserves to be hurt."
- "It's not your fault."
- "I am worried about you."
- "How can I help?" or "What do you need?"

Stay Connected – Your friend needs you to listen and be supportive. Respond with understanding and empathy, not anger. Your friend may not want help from anyone. Understand what you see or hear may make you frustrated or upset. Hearing about your friend's experience may remind you of your own experiences of abuse and trauma. Don't close the door of communication by threatening to do something they don't want. Also, expect that your friend may share and then not say anything to you for several weeks or even months. Let them know you are available when they want to talk.

Get Support – Your friend may find that it is easier talking about the situation with someone anonymously over the phone. Help them reach out to a local domestic or sexual violence organization, or one of the national support helplines listed on the back of this booklet. You can also call the helplines to get support in how to help your friend.





Why Does This Happen in Our Communities

Gender violence is a problem in our society that affects all communities. Gender violence can include abusive relationships, teen dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, domestic violence, and sex trafficking. While everyone is hurt by violence, girls, women, and people who are transgender or gender nonconforming experience higher rates of abuse and rape.

Gender violence does not happen in isolation. Gender violence is supported by larger forces or systemic oppressions, like patriarchy, which takes power over and harms girls and women. Systemic oppressions are the ways in which history, culture, beliefs, institutional practices, and policies interact to keep a ranking or power for some over others.

Gender violence happens in our society because of our cultural beliefs and what we consider to be “normal” or “acceptable.” In mainstream or dominant culture, men are given more value and power than any other gender. This unequal distribution of power and other unequal systemic distribution of power leads to gender violence.

Our society values human beings based on identities, like gender, race, national origin, class, sexuality, ability, immigration, or refugee status. Ranking human beings supports the power and privileges that some groups of people hold to keep power over others.

24/7 Helplines

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 1-866-331-9474 – Speak with peer advocates or text LOVEIS to 22522. The crisis text line provides round-the-clock support for anyone in crisis which can be reached by texting HOME to 741741.

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673 – Get help and referrals from advocates.

Trevor Lifeline (for LGBTQ youth): 1-866-488-7386 – Crisis intervention and suicide prevention for LGBTQ youth.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 – Free, confidential support for people in crisis.

National Runaway Safeline: 1-800-786-2929 – Share your story and build a plan.

National Street Harassment Hotline: 1-855-897-5910 – Support, advice, and information.





Additional Resources

This booklet provides you with some of the information you may need to make the choices that are best for you. Here are more online resources:

www.joinonelove.org – Information healthy and unhealthy relationships

www.KnowYourIX.org – Information for individuals who have experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault

www.TeenVogue.com – Articles on healthy and abusive relationships

www.EverydayFeminism.org – Deeper exploration of why abuse happens in our society

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