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Dating Violence and Acquaintance Assault

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- Recognizing A Potential Abuser in a Dating Relationship
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Dating violence and acquaintance assault happens more frequently than most people think. 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. More than 80 percent of all sexual assaults[1] occur between people who know each other. These assaults happen on dates, in people's homes, at parties and in the daylight hours as well as at night. The assailant may be a friend, lover, boyfriend, classmate, coworker or even a family member.

A recent research study by Frinter and Rubinson (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.

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.

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, I use the term "he" to refer to the potential perpetrator. Here are some warning signs that might signal potential verbal, physical or sexual abuse:

1. Does he lose his temper frequently and more easily than seems necessary?

2. Does he abuse alcohol or other drugs?

3. Does he commit acts of violence against objects and things rather than people?

4. Does he show extreme jealousy?

5. Does he become enraged when you won't listen to his opinion or advice?

6. Does he expect you to spend all your time with him or inform him of your whereabouts?

7. Does he tell you how to dress, how to wear your hair and/or makeup?

8. Does he follow you — is he always watching you to see where you are, what you are doing, who you are talking to?

9. 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?

10. Is he being physically or verbally abused at home, or is his parents' relationship physically violent?

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.

By taking some of the following precautions, you can reduce 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.

- **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"

- **Trust your intuition.** Pay attention to behavior that doesn't seem right. If something feels wrong, it probably is. If you find yourself in a vulnerable or uncomfortable situation, take action.

If You Have Been a Victim

If you have been a victim of dating or acquaintance assault, there are constructive steps you can take to help put your life back together. Always keep in mind that your personal safety is the highest priority.

- **Tell someone.** Go to a friend's house or any place where people can give you emotional support.

- **Go to a hospital.** See a doctor immediately for treatment of any injuries and for other tests which can provide important medical evidence. In the case of sexual assault, don't douche, bathe, shower or change clothes before you go.

- **Report the assault.** Just like any form of assault, dating violence and acquaintance rape are serious crimes. You should report an incident to law enforcement. Reporting an assault does not mean you must press charges, but it may prevent yourself and others from further abuse.

- **Seek counseling.** A professional can help you regain the trust, support, and faith in your own judgment that the incident has damaged.

- **Confront your assailant.** This often helps regain the control you may feel you've lost. This may mean writing an angry letter that you do not mail, or it may mean going to court. Unfortunately, the court system's judgment may not be very satisfying.

- **Try the civil court rather than the criminal court.** Civil court is more likely to decide in the victim's favor. Consider suing a third party, such as the company, organization or group that failed to provide adequate security, for pain and suffering damages and for the cost of therapy.

- **Remember you are not alone.** Acquaintance assault is far too common in dating and cohabitation situations. Nationally, it happens to one in four women. Get help. Your local rape crisis center, hospital, attorney or therapist can put you in touch with a peer group. Talking to others in similar situations can be a tremendous support.

What You Can Do

1. Get involved. Encourage your community to participate in Cooperative Extension's four-year effort to reduce family violence.

2. Build community coalitions to address violence in general and family violence in particular. Support the efforts of all private and public organizations as they educate people about the risk factors of violence in relationships and what to do to protect yourself and family.

3. Encourage your religious organization to sponsor educational workshops for youth and adults on date rape, sexual assault and marital violence.

4. Encourage your school to begin a comprehensive program to educate students to "de-glorify" violence. Educate students on appropriate dating behavior and to say "no" to inappropriate and unwelcome behavior.

5. Increase your own family's resistance to violent behavior by intentionally working to strengthen it and by eliminating unwanted, dysfunctional behavior.

6. Be a role model. Do not support the stereotypes that encourage dominant-submissive relationships. By your words and behaviors, model respectful, non-violent actions in your own family and expect the same in your community.

7. Seek professional help or counseling if violence exists in your family, or in the relationship between an acquaintance and you.

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[1]Sexual assault is defined as sexual penetration by use or threat of force.

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