

TIP SHEET: Understanding Dating Abuse

Dating abuse isn't an argument that happens once in a while – **it is a *pattern of coercive behaviors used to establish control over a partner***. All teens are at risk for dating abuse, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, religion or sexual orientation.

Dating abuse can take many forms. An abuser may use one or multiple types of abuse. Sometimes an abuser will start with one form of abuse (i.e., emotional) and build to another (i.e., physical). Types of abuse include:

- **Physical Abuse:** Any intentional use of physical force with the intent to cause fear or injury, like hitting, shoving, biting, strangling, kicking or using a weapon.
- **Verbal or Emotional Abuse:** Non-physical behaviors such as threats, insults, constant monitoring, humiliation, intimidation, isolation or stalking.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Any action that impacts a person's ability to control their sexual activity or the circumstances in which sexual activity occurs, including rape, coercion or restricting access to birth control.
- **Digital Abuse:** Use of technologies and/or social media networking to intimidate, harass or threaten a dating partner. This could include demanding passwords, checking cell phones, cyber bullying, sexting, excessive or threatening texts or stalking on Facebook or other social media.

Abuse can be difficult to identify and understand, and every situation looks a little different.

Dating abuse...

...is a **pattern of behaviors**, not a single event or an isolated incident.

...**will escalate** over time. Relationships do not start off as abusive, and abuse can happen at a very slow pace. Little by little and sometimes very slowly, a relationship goes from healthy to unhealthy to abusive.

... **comes in cycles**. Even abusive relationships will have positive aspects and good times. Tension will build, there will be an incident, and then there are often peaceful periods where the abuser apologizes and promises to change. However, the abuse will always return and will become more severe.

...**is intentional**. For a relationship to be abusive, one partner deliberately gains and maintains power and control over the victim. It is intentional, and the abuser is actively trying to change the victim's behavior. When the victim doesn't do what the abuser wants, the abuser will punish him or her. This punishment could range from verbal (i.e., yelling, insulting) to physical. The victim will change his or her behavior to avoid punishment and accommodate the abuser.