



Dear Parents,

As the Executive Director of a non-profit organization that assists survivors of domestic violence and having raised two teens, I am often asked by other parents to talk about the dangers of dating abuse, what signs parents should be looking for, and how to help navigate their child out of an unhealthy relationship. Unfortunately, there are no simple or easy answers to these questions.

A common characteristic of unhealthy and abusive relationships is the control that the abusive partner seeks to maintain in the abusive relationship. This includes telling someone what they can wear, who they can hang out with, where they can go, calling them names, and humiliating them in front of others. Over time, from one's own social network increases, as the abuser insists on spending time "just the two of us" and threatens to leave or cause harm if things do not go the way they want, "You must not love me." Creating this type of isolation and dissolution of one's social support (loss of friends, disconnectedness from family) are hallmarks of controlling behavior. In addition, abusers often monitor cell phones and emails and, for example, may threaten harm if a response to a text message is not instant. Parents are often unaware of such controlling tactics as these occur insidiously over time, and an adolescent themselves may not recognize their behavior as unhealthy. "They must love me because they just want to spend time with me." While the following non-specific warning signs could indicate other things such as depression or drug use, these behaviors should also raise a red flag to parents and adult caregivers about the possibility of an unhealthy relationship:

- No longer hanging out with his or her circle of friends.
- Wearing the same clothing
- Distracted when spoken to
- Constantly checking cell phone; gets upset when asked to turn phone off
- Withdrawn, quieter than usual
- Angry and irritable when asked how they are doing
- Making excuses for their boyfriend
- Showering immediately after getting home
- Unexplained scratches or bruises

Sexual coercion and violence are also not uncommon in teen dating abuse. Again, because of the emotional abuse and control, victims of sexual violence may be convinced that they are to blame for what has happened. "You'd do this if you loved me." or "If you don't have sex with me, I will leave you." are common examples of sexual coercion.