

RAPE AND ABUSE CRISIS SERVICE

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Why Teens Stay in Abusive Relationships

One of the questions that is asked most frequently of people who are in abusive relationships, whether it's domestic violence or dating violence, is why they stay in those relationships. This can be a complicated issue, especially for teens. There is usually no single reason for a teen to stay in an abusive dating relationship, but there are many factors which can make it difficult for her/him to leave, some of which are unique to being a teenager. For example:

- The victim doesn't want to be alone. There are a lot of pressures in society to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Another complication arises if the victim and abuser share the same group of friends. (Being alone can be scary, but living without abuse can be a much better life.)
- Teens may be reluctant to look for help. Because many teens are struggling to become independent from their parents, they may not want to confide in them when troubles arise. Sometimes, their friends may not be supportive, either, pressuring them instead to stay together with the abuser. (Confidential hotlines like RACS' are available for teens to talk things out and figure out their options.)
- A lack of experience with dating relationships may lead teens to believe that jealousy and violence are signs of love. (But, physical abuse and jealousy are not about love – they're about gaining power and control, and are not a normal part of a healthy, loving relationship.)
- The victim believes that she/he deserves no better. Gender role stereotypes can make this more of an issue for a female victim. If the victim is a female in a relationship with a male, she may have learned from family, religion, or culture that men are supposed to be in charge, can't help being violent, or have the right to discipline their women. She may believe that it's the female's role to put up with this behavior and try to keep the male happy. (But a healthy relationship is a partnership based on equality, regardless of gender.)
- The victim blames herself/himself. The abuser may blame the victim for his or her abusive behavior, saying that the victim made him/her angry, or did something to deserve the abuse. The victim may believe this. (The fact is that there is nothing a person can do to make someone else hurt them, and no one deserves to be hurt under any circumstances. Everyone is 100% responsible for their own behavior.)
- The abuser threatens to hurt himself, the victim, or others if the victim tries to end the relationship. (If the victim has been threatened, it is very important to talk to someone about developing a safety plan before leaving.)
- Many individuals may have difficulty identifying abuse when it's occurring. This is especially an issue if the teen is growing up in a home where there is violence, since this seems like "normal" behavior to him/her.
- The relationship has damaged the victim's self-esteem. This usually has already occurred by the time the abuse starts.