

Tainted LOVE

More teens than you think are in abusive relationships.

By **Julie Mehta**

I imagine you're in love. Your sweetie holds your hand, stares into your eyes, says you're special, and strokes your cheek. Then imagine that the same hand that reached out for you is raised against you; the same mouth that spoke tender words is telling you that you're stupid and worthless, that no one else will ever love you. That's what life is like in an abusive relationship.

Chances are, you or someone you know will someday be physically or emotionally abused by a partner. "Young people often think if you're not bleeding or bruised, it's not abuse," says Stephanie Nilva of Break the Cycle, a non-profit organization dedicated to ending teen relationship abuse. "There are many kinds of

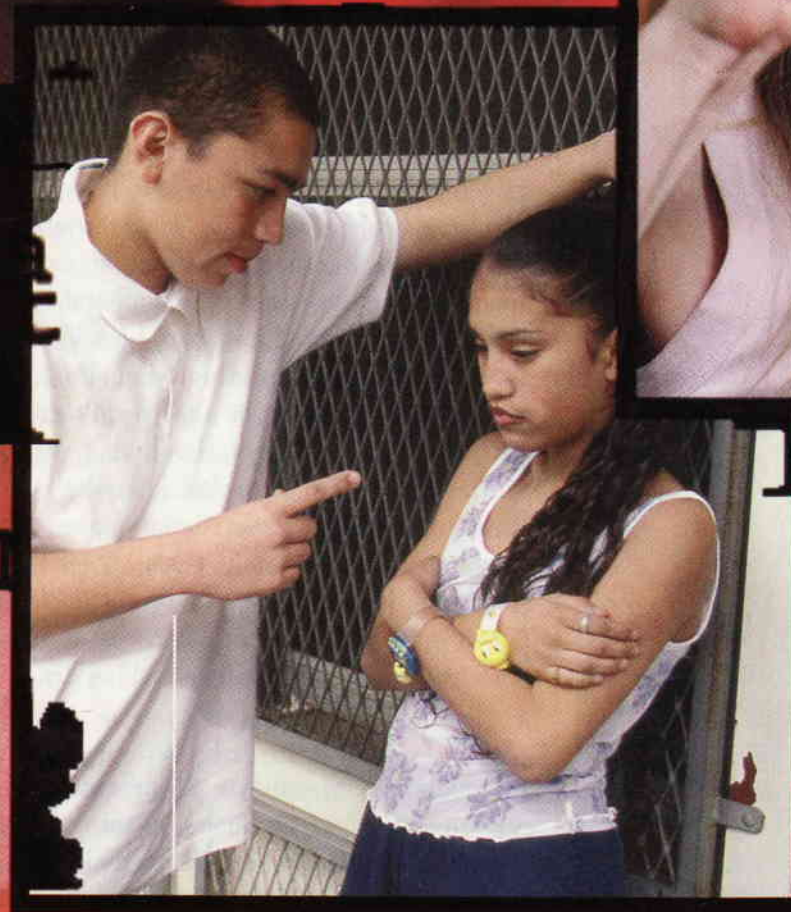
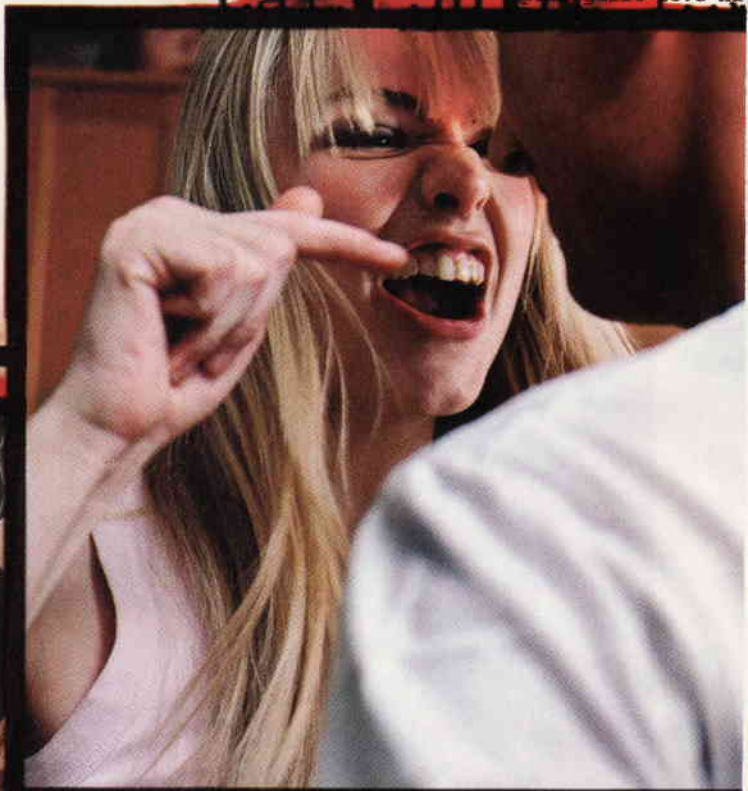
abuse that don't leave a mark." Abuse can include anything from emotional abuse (constant put-downs and humiliation) to physical abuse (violence) to unwanted sexual contact.

How It Starts

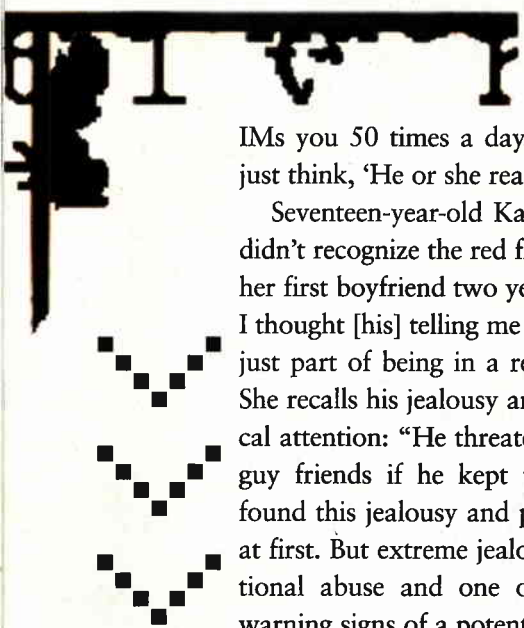
Studies show that one in three teens has experienced abuse in a romantic relationship, and the rate of intimate partner violence is higher among 16- to 24-year-olds than any other age group. "With teens, the biggest issue is lack of experience," says Jane Randel of the clothing company Liz Claiborne, which created an educational program about dating violence for high school students. "It may be their first real relationship, and they don't know that if someone



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IMs you 50 times a day, it's a problem. They just think, 'He or she really loves me.'"

Seventeen-year-old Kate* of Texas says she didn't recognize the red flags in the behavior of her first boyfriend two years ago. "At the time, I thought [his] telling me what not to wear was just part of being in a relationship," she says. She recalls his jealousy and demands for physical attention: "He threatened to kill one of my guy friends if he kept talking to me." Kate found this jealousy and possessiveness exciting at first. But extreme jealousy is a form of emotional abuse and one of the most common warning signs of a potentially violent partner.

Be a True Friend

What if a friend is in an abusive relationship? You may not fully understand the situation, but you can help him or her. About 30 percent of all murdered teen girls are killed by boyfriends. You may be the lifeline that your friend needs. For more advice, visit www.loveisnotabuse.com.

Your friend may be in an abusive relationship if he or she

- has bruises and cuts with no logical explanation;
- has become isolated from friends and family;
- is constantly canceling plans for fake-sounding reasons;
- always fears angering the boyfriend or girlfriend;
- shows a dramatic change in clothes or general appearance;
- has declining grades and has lost interest in school activities;
- has decreased confidence and has difficulty making decisions.

What can you do?

- Do not confront the abuser directly.
- Say that you're concerned for your friend's safety. Listen well.
- Be nonjudgmental. Insist nobody deserves to be treated badly.
- Offer your friend information and resources that could help.
- Urge your friend to talk to a parent, teacher, or counselor.

If you think a friend is in serious danger, tell a trusted adult immediately.

Hidden Danger

Though many teens think jealousy comes from love and violence from anger, relationship abuse is actually all about control. Abuse is not an occasional argument but rather an escalating pattern of behaviors by one partner designed to gain power over the other. Even actions that initially seem sweet, such as when a boy gives his girlfriend a cell phone, can turn out to be about control if he starts calling constantly to check up on where she is and whom she's with.

"If someone punched you in the face and then said, 'Do you want to get some pizza?' you'd run for the hills, but abusers don't show who they are at the beginning," says Nilva. "Once you're attached and spending less time with others ... you feel like you can't live without [that person]."

Trish* of California knows how charming an abuser can be. She was 16 when she started going out with a 19-year-old she'd met through friends. "He was very soft-spoken and looked like he couldn't hurt a fly. He was always telling me how pretty and smart I was," she remembers. After nine months of dating, she agreed to be his girlfriend. "I would constantly have to be with him; otherwise, he'd get very angry. He'd throw things at me or break a bottle in front of me. One minute he was the sweetest person, and then in two seconds he would just snap. I felt like I was always walking on eggshells around him."

"The abuser might be the world's greatest boyfriend 80 percent of the time," says Jill Murray, a California psychologist who's counseled hundreds of young dating-violence survivors. "So the girl thinks if she twists herself into what he wants her to be, he'll change. But it only gets worse." Eventually, Trish's boyfriend started physically attacking her.

Men at Risk

Although experts estimate 85 percent of relationship abuse is by males against females, Murray says girls can be highly verbally abusive to their boyfriends. This can range from name-calling to public humiliation.

Fifteen-year-old Kenny* of Arizona says he has a guy friend who “was brought up not to raise a hand against a woman, and his girlfriend would beat up on him.” Kenny, who talks to students about relationship abuse in a program called Peer Solutions, advised his friend to speak up. He tells boys who see a buddy being violent with a girlfriend to call him out on it.

Abuse isn't limited to straight relationships. Homosexual teens often face unique issues. Getting out of an abusive, same-sex relationship can be especially hard if the victim fears being publicly exposed by the abusive partner.

Moving On

Breaking up with an abuser is not easy. Occasionally, it can be dangerous. Abusers may threaten to harm their partners or themselves when faced with losing their relationships.

Kate's boyfriend became physically violent with her for the first time the day after she tried to break up with him. “He hit me so hard on the right side of my face, he busted my tear duct. I can no longer cry out of that eye.” She told her parents, and they got her a legal protective order against him. For Trish, college was her escape from her destructive relationship.

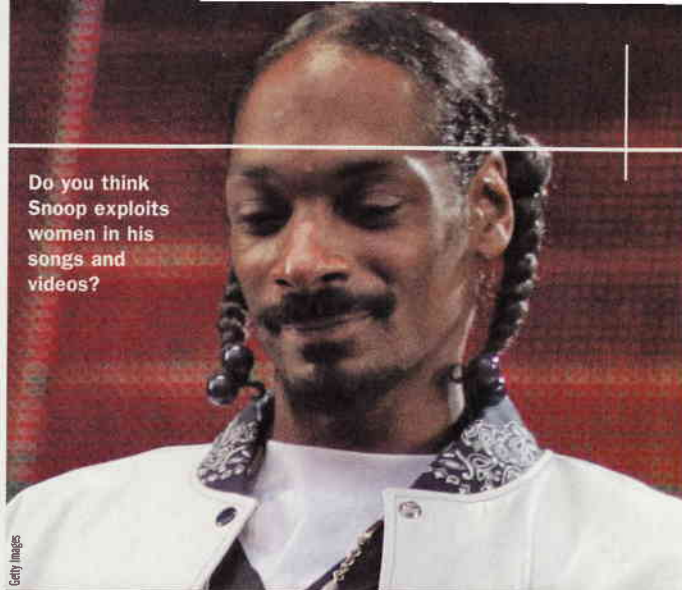
Even if you're not ready to end an abusive relationship, experts suggest that you take precautions: Go to and from school with a friend, keep a journal of the abuse, and have a secret refuge the abuser doesn't know about.

Don't do the breakup on your own. “When breaking up, never be alone with [the abuser]. Take along an older guy, like your brother or father or a male teacher,” urges Murray.

As hard as it may seem to break free, Murray stresses, everyone deserves better than an abusive partner. “If you are a good person and care about others, you will always find someone else, someone who treats you well. When an abuser says, ‘You'll never find someone like me,’ remember that's a good thing.”

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*Names of teens have been changed.



Do you think Snoop exploits women in his songs and videos?

Dangerous Tunes?

Although the exact link between popular music and dating violence may be hard to prove, it's hard to avoid seeing some connections. Turn on the radio to any hip-hop or rap station and you often hear lyrics full of misogyny—words laced over danceable beats that call women “bitches” and “hoes” and talk about dominating women and even hitting them. In his song “Can U Control Yo Hoe?” Snoop Dogg raps:

“Can you control your hoe?
(You've got to know what to do and what to say)
You've got to put that bitch in her place,
even if it's slapping her in her face.”

But rap isn't alone in fostering violence against women—though it catches the most blame. Some rock music glorifies extremely destructive relationships and objectifies women. Consider the lyrics of the song “Bitch” by industrial metal group Dope:

“The one I love I hate, I could suffocate ...
I love to hate you, I love to hate you Bitch”

One scene in Dope's video shows the singer grabbing a woman's hair to whip her head back.

Of course, music isn't mind control. People are still responsible for their own actions. But you have to wonder: Are these songs sending out a message that violence is an acceptable part of a relationship?

—By Leslie Harris O'Hanlon

What do you think? Tell us at www.weeklyreader.com/ch2.