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Break the Silence:

Teen Dating Abuse

Her name was Alice. She leaned slumped over in the corner, her hands reach for the small of her back. It was tender. His class ring hung on a silver chain around her neck, a constant reminder of his love. She knew that a bruise was forming under her pale skin. A rushing rainbow of blues, blacks, purples, and yellows. She was grateful; he never touched her fragile face. At 16 years old she had never felt any other hands on her but her loving boyfriend's. She didn't mind it that way; she was so madly in love with him that it didn't matter that he would get rough with her. She deserved it most of the time. He was just showing his affection. ..

“One in three high school students have been or will be involved in an abusive relationship”, states the Office of Criminal Justice Services in a special report. “and one in five college females will experience a form of dating violence.” Such staggering statistics are often pushed to the back page of the newspaper, overlooked and forgotten (Office p.4). They appear next to the story of the girl who overcame such trauma and is finally ready to speak out. By examining the different types of teen dating abuse, raising awareness, and possible solutions, teenagers can take a proactive stance on the fight against dating violence.

Dating violence comes in many ugly forms, not just physical abuse. Abuse in general is a cycle. It starts with a sweet and romantic period. One where the world will lie down and be still for the love you both share. Everything is perfect. Then the tension begins to build. The monster within begins to beat against his insides. The abuser becomes moody and withdrawn. He might nitpick, yell, and threaten. All the while, she's walking on eggshells attempting not to break a

single one. She's trying not to set *it* free. One day, everything is not enough and the ugly monster is released. It rears its revolting head and unleashes many forms of anger.

Physical violence is often times the most publicized form of abuse. This includes many forms of violence including choking, punching, spitting, imprisonment, rape, and in some cases death. Physical violence normally escalates after an abuser thinks it is pardonable. This violence is about more than just injuring the victim. It is about having complete control. This monster can control an entire relationship and even end lives.

Alice timidly watched as he crossed the room towards her. She knew all too well what was going to happen. It didn't matter that she wasn't in the mood, he was. All too soon, he was upon her, pressing her still tender back into the chair. She tried to push him off but she was no use. She tried to yell but his left hand was tightly clasped over her lips. She watched the room spin as she was being choked. Wildly fighting for air and defending herself, her eyes brimmed with red hot tears. After a few more moments of struggling, she gave herself to him; tears streaming down her face the entire time. His ring began to beat against her neck in violent rhythm.

Sexual abuse is a delicate topic when it comes to dating violence. When a partner is forced to do any unwanted sexual action then it is defined as rape. According to the Students Against Dating Violence website, sexual abuse often occurs when the abuser pressures or physically forces the victim to perform any sexual activity. Most people do not view this as rape. It is socially "expected" from a partner in a relationship and there for they are just doing their job (Students P. 4). But this highly unpublicized form of dating violence is exactly that, violence.

Alice waited; he would be back from practice soon. She hadn't left his truck for three hours, just in case he came back for something. She couldn't be caught outside of this truck. So there she sat faithfully awaiting her loving attacker. A tap on the window awoke her from her thoughts; there he was in all of his beautiful blameless glory. She could see on his face that she would not be hit tonight; he was too tired and worn from practice. But he was upset, what had she done? Thoughtlessly she grasped his ring. She knew tonight would be worse than the last.

Not all abuse is physical. Emotional violence can cause deeper scars than the typical bruises of a shove. Normally the psychological effects of such abuse are so much more profound than what shows on the placid surface. The victim is made to feel negatively about themselves and positively about the abuser. The abuser places themself on an untouchable pedestal. The victim often times will feel as though they are a pawn in a constant manipulative mind game with a continuous feeling of guilt and helplessness. There are many ways to spot emotional abuse such as: constant put downs, threats, yelling, turning the blame, and threatening suicide. Phrases such as, "I love you, but..." are also warning signs of emotional abuse.

There are many symptoms of teen abuse besides bruises. The *Journal of Marriage and Family* published a study that listed many side effects of abuse. These include, loss of appetite, self-blame, terror, depression, guilt, mistrust of others, anxiety, and suicide. It may lead to drug abuse and performing poorly in school (Foshee p.339). The Center for Disease and Health Control published a study that also stated that it is possible that abuse can lead to various self harmful behaviors such as anorexia, bulimia, and self mutilation (Teen p.3).

Alice was crying. She tried to hide it from him; it wasn't his fault. She could take a punch but somehow his words still hurt her more. They hit her in different places. She just kept

confirming his love for her in her head as his sharp words cut into her skin. "I do this because I love you." He crooned as he stroked her still tender back. She remembered one of the long forgotten posters in the hall at school, "Love doesn't hurt" it said. All she could think was, "Then why am I still in pain?"

There are many ways to take a proactive stance in the fight against dating violence. The number one way is through awareness. The more people that are aware of the warning signs, the easier it is to spot abuse. Not only do teens need to be informed but also parents and school officials. One of the greatest assists to teenagers is their peers. They have such a great influence over the individual. A long talk about stopping the abuse can mean much more when coming from a friend rather than an adult. Another way to raise awareness is through student made posters and essays.

Her best friend talked to her. She sat Alice down and handed her a pamphlet for a group. The front cover had a flashy image of a beautiful girl with a black eye. She too had a ring on a chain around her neck. Alice reached for hers. The bold letters read, "Break the Silence". All Alice could do was cry.



This is an example of a teen made poster to raise awareness to teen dating violence. Another proactive way that teens can be involved in stopping dating violence is by creating a teen network of support. Create a phone tree and a code word. When someone feels abused they can alert someone in the network with a code word that doesn't alarm the attacker. By having support is it much easier to break away from a violent situation.

Schools play a large part in preventing teen dating abuse. Teens spend most of their week at school around teachers, coaches, and administration. Training sessions should be held at least once a year to address the issue of teen violence, including dating violence. Such sessions should include warning signs, conversation starters, and possible disciplinary actions. Not only teachers should attend but also coaches, directors, and school administration. The more eyes that are on the lookout for abuse the harder it is to hide.

Alice's mind raced as she stood outside of his house. She had nothing left to lose. He was threatening to leave her again. Last night was the worst she had ever felt. She needed to find a way to make it one her own. The tears brimming in her eyes began to fall as she placed his ring on his front doorstep.

Making the final decision to leave an abuse relationship is difficult no matter the age or severity. It requires a great amount of strength and courage to finally break the silence and stand up against dating violence. Those who have should be recognized for their strength and not be buried in the newspaper. By raising awareness and being a proactive individual, together we can break the silence and put the class ring on the doorstep of dating violence.

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