



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Impact of Dating Violence and Manipulation on Teenagers Mental Health

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## ABSTRACT

Dating violence encompasses physical, sexual, emotional, and digital abuse, profoundly affecting the physical and psychological well-being of young individuals. The prevalence of dating violence is comparable to marital violence, with women being the primary victims, although violence against men is also notable. Key risk factors include exposure to familial violence, cultural gender roles, peer influence, and substance use. The consequences of dating violence are severe, leading to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The aim is to mitigate the effects of victimization resulting from dating violence and manipulation, increasingly observed among high school students and young adults, through effective intervention programs. These programs are designed to target the specified age group, promote healthy relationship behaviors, and provide primary and secondary prevention and support to victims. Effective intervention requires both primary and secondary prevention programs targeting high school students and young adults, promoting healthy relationship behaviors and providing support for victims. Comprehensive education, awareness programs, and strong support systems from family and community are crucial in mitigating the effects of dating violence and fostering safer relationships. Despite ongoing publications on the subject, the inadequacy of current reports highlights the need for more frequent and rigorous research in this area. This review underscores the need for increased resources and tailored strategies to address and prevent dating violence, taking into account gender differences in attitudes and perceptions.

## Introduction

In contemporary society, early romantic relationships play a significant role in the social and emotional development of adolescents. However, not all relationships are positive; some involve behaviors such as violence and manipulation, which can profoundly affect young people's physical and mental well-being. This phenomenon, known as dating violence, can manifest as physical, sexual, and digital abuse, leading primarily to serious psychological issues.

Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional changes, typically occurring between the ages of 12 and 24.<sup>1</sup> Following this period, young adulthood begins, ranging from approximately 18-24 years and extending into the early 30s. This phase involves significant decision-making in education, career, and personal relationships, representing the transition to full adult maturity<sup>2</sup>. Research indicates that violence in pre-marital dating relationships is as prevalent as in marriages<sup>3</sup> and that women who have experienced physical abuse during marriage often faced similar situations in previous relationships.<sup>4</sup> While most victims in violent relationships are women<sup>5,6</sup>, dating violence against men is also significant.

This paper aims to examine the effects of dating violence on young people's mental health, identify the risk factors that increase the likelihood of violence, review implemented protective programs, and provide recommendations on preventive measures and intervention strategies. This study conducted a review of the literature using databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycArticles, and PsycInfo.

## Definitions and Types of Dating Violence and Manipulation

Dating violence is defined as physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, or digital coercion used to controlling the partner in romantic relationships during adolescence. This type of interpersonal violence includes emotional crises, outbursts of

anger, and jealousy that escalate into aggressive behaviors, social restrictions, intimidation, and coercive actions within the relationship over time<sup>7-10</sup>. Dating violence is categorized into three types: physical, sexual, and psychological/emotional violence.

**Physical Violence:** Physical aggression includes actions that cause bodily harm, such as hitting, biting, scratching, pushing, slapping, using a weapon or any action causing physical damage<sup>11</sup>. Despite the ease of identifying physical aggression and its inclusion in most assessment tools, other aggressive and coercive behaviors that function similarly may be overlooked<sup>10</sup>.

**Sexual Violence:** Sexual coercion is defined as forcing a partner into sexual intercourse or other sexual activities without their consent or compelling them to participate more than they willingly would<sup>12,13</sup>. Sexual pressure is also observed following emotional or physical violence within the relationship<sup>13</sup>.

**Emotional Abuse:** Emotional abuse includes behaviors such as constant criticism, insults, belittling, and threats<sup>11</sup>, creating fear and dependency in the partner<sup>13</sup>. Different forms of violence often coexist, with psychological violence typically preceding physical violence, and it is reported to cause more damage than physical violence<sup>14,15</sup>.

**Digital Violence:** Digital violence encompasses actions such as cyberbullying and unauthorized sharing of private images, often beginning with social media surveillance.

Manipulation involves strategies aimed at weakening a person's decision-making ability and controlling them by stripping away their independence. Common manipulation tactics include inducing guilt, isolating from support systems, gaslighting, and emotional blackmail.

## Attitudes and Perceptions Toward Dating Violence

Gender plays a significant role in the perception and acceptance of dating violence<sup>16</sup>. Men generally

have a higher level of acceptance of violence compared to women, who are more aware of violence. Many men do not perceive behaviors such as neglect, jealousy, social restriction, and infidelity as violence.

Conversely, many women primarily recognize physical violence and may not be aware of psychological violence. In patriarchal societies, women subjected to violence for not complying with male authority often blame themselves, contributing to continued exposure to violence and a reluctance to seek help or engage in prevention activities<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, cultural influences on attitudes and perceptions toward violence must be considered.

Research indicates that increased social support decreases the acceptance of violence, while individuals who have experienced domestic violence are more likely to accept it<sup>18</sup>. Women perceive dating violence as a factor causing physical and psychological harm while men do not consider it harmful or a reason to end the relationship. The perception of dating relationships as “ownership” and women report using violence as a method to protect themselves from physical or sexual violence “possessiveness” contributes to the continuation of violence, as partners negatively perceive protective interventions due to this mindset<sup>19</sup>.

### Risk Factors

Investigating the causes of increasing dating violence reveals many risk factors that heighten the tendency towards violence.<sup>20</sup> According to Thibaut and Kelley, adolescents' behaviors in relationships are significantly influenced by their beliefs about relationships and their close environment due to their lack of experience<sup>21</sup>. The first risk factor arises from children exposed to violence within the family continuing these learned behavior patterns into adulthood<sup>22</sup>. As children grow, their insufficient learning of emotion control leads to aggressive behaviors in adulthood<sup>23</sup>. Punishment by parents and a lack of attention also increase violent actions<sup>24</sup>.

There is a positive relationship between the family's educational level and socio-economic status and the reduction of violence<sup>25</sup>.

Cultural factors assign different meanings to gender roles, particularly regarding violence against women, where men's desire to control, punish, and demonstrate power manifests as physical violence<sup>26,27</sup>. Examples include patriarchal family structures, educational disparities, isolation of women, and low social investment<sup>28</sup>. Men who have experienced sexual violence in childhood have higher rates of sexual violence perpetration<sup>29</sup>. Young women who have experienced domestic violence have a higher likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating violence again<sup>28</sup>.

Culturally, high unemployment and poverty rates, higher male autonomy, and lower rates of women's higher education are associated with increased dating violence<sup>30</sup>. Women who accept gender inequality, viewing femininity as passivity and submissiveness and masculinity as dominance, experience higher rates of dating violence, while men normalize this violence<sup>30,31</sup>.

Peers can be more influential than parents in shaping aggressive behaviors<sup>32</sup>. The inclusion of peers in dating violence, particularly male sexual aggression, significantly increases the level of violence and victimization<sup>33,34</sup>. Alcohol and substance use also increases the likelihood of experiencing dating violence and engaging in supportive behaviors for violence<sup>35,36</sup>.

### Prevalence

Dating violence is a mutual situation between partners, but the rates of victimization are higher for women. According to the first report on the subject by Makepeace in 1981, dating violence is more common among adolescents and young people, with one in five university student couples involved in dating violence<sup>3</sup>. Among university-aged students, it is equal and similar in rate between genders<sup>37</sup>.

In romantic relationships formed during young adulthood, individuals may turn to violent behaviors, especially when rejected or deprived of love<sup>36</sup>. In a study with 910 university students, 53% of women and 27% of men experienced dating violence<sup>38</sup>.

### Effects of Dating Violence

Aggression and violence in adolescent and young adult dating relationships cause harmful effects on partners. Individuals who have experienced or perpetrated physical and psychological abuse have lower self-esteem and self-worth and higher levels of self-blame, anger, and anxiety<sup>13</sup>. Individuals may develop the perception that violence is a viable method for solving communication and problem-solving issues in relationships.

Depression, resulting from increased anxiety levels, can manifest in intense sadness, appetite and sleep disturbances, fatigue, and struggles in academic or social areas. Common anxiety symptoms include worry, restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and physical symptoms such as headaches and gastrointestinal issues. Anxiety can disrupt routines and trigger panic attacks characterized by intense fear and physical discomfort<sup>39</sup>.

Dating violence, along with a decrease in emotional well-being, can lead to self-harm and an increase in suicidal thoughts and attempts<sup>40,41</sup>. It is also known that being in a violent relationship increases risky sexual behaviors, such as not using condoms, especially among women<sup>42</sup>.

Eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa, characterized by severe restriction of food intake due to fear of gaining weight; Bulimia Nervosa, characterized by periods of overeating followed by purging or excessive exercise and Binge Eating Disorder, characterized by consuming large amounts of food rapidly can be triggered by daily chaos and stress and cause both physical and severe mental distress.

Young people experiencing dating violence and manipulation may turn to substance abuse as a way

to cope with their struggles. Turning to alcohol to manage stress and emotional turmoil, or drugs, prescription medications, and other substances to escape or numb difficult emotions, can provide relief from emotional distress and pressure but can also lead to addiction, health problems, and deterioration of mental well-being.

### Exposure to traumatic events

Just like physical or sexual violence can lead to PTSD in young people, characterized by recurrent distressing memories, feelings of hopelessness, and a decline in interest in pleasurable activities, deteriorating quality of life. Victims avoid places, activities, or people that trigger traumatic memories, are easily startled, and constantly feel tense, often accompanied by sleep problems.

The constant criticism, humiliation, and controlling behaviors of the abuser gradually diminish the victims' self-worth, making them feel unworthy of love or respect, leading to constant self-doubt and questioning of their abilities and choices. Individuals who believe they are inadequate and flawed will eventually avoid interacting with people, isolating themselves. Emotional abuse often targets body image and self-esteem, leading individuals to develop unhealthy relationships with food and their bodies.

Self-harm and suicidal thoughts are related to the health impacts of dating violence and manipulation. Young people may engage in self-harming actions such as cutting or burning as a coping mechanism or a way to feel in control. Suicidal feelings and actions can stem from feelings of hopelessness and isolation.

### Protective Programs for Dating Violence

Programs developed to prevent dating violence and protect victims are evaluated in two dimensions. Primary prevention programs are broad measures targeting the entire population, focusing on individuals at risk of experiencing violence. They aim to prevent violence by providing information about identified risk factors<sup>9</sup>. Primary prevention

programs mainly cover adolescents in high school, aiming to increase socially acceptable behaviors<sup>24</sup>. Secondary prevention programs focus on stopping ongoing violence. Researchers have developed programs targeting both protection methods, specifically for adolescence and young adulthood, where dating violence is most frequently observed.

Avery-Leaf et al.<sup>43</sup> implemented a five-session prevention program aimed at changing attitudes towards dating violence, which included didactic, skill-based sessions targeting both perpetration and victimization of dating aggression. The primary goals of the program, completed by 190 men and 190 women, were to promote equitable and healthy communication in relationships, remove violence as a problem-solving method, and provide knowledge about resources available to victims of violence. At the end of the program, both men and women had a lower acceptance of violence compared to the control group.

Wolfe et al.<sup>44</sup> developed a prevention program aimed at observing the development process of violence with repeated follow-up over 16 months. The participants of this study, selected from individuals who had experienced domestic violence, were involved in an 18-session program aiming to reduce victimization and emotional problems and strengthen communication skills by learning alternative ways to violence and healthy interaction. The results varied by gender, with women showing more positive and significant behavioral changes, while men exhibited undesirable behaviors during the follow-up period. The defensive attitude of men towards prevention programs and the violent dating relationships highlighted the necessity of secondary prevention programs once again.

Foshee et al.<sup>45</sup> tested the Safe Dates program, developed with a focus on dating violence. In this program, school and community activities included a theater performance, a 10-session curriculum, and a poster contest as primary prevention programs, while community activities providing services to

adolescents in troubled relationships served as secondary prevention programs. The group followed and compared with the control group reported less psychological and sexual abuse.

Having a strong support system from family and the community is crucial for young people to cope with the effects of dating violence and manipulation. Families should create environments where children can comfortably talk about their relationships and emotions, encourage sharing with love and understanding in these environments where they feel valued, and support seeking professional help if desired.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Dating violence is a prevalent issue, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Young people and adolescents are not only victims of violence but also perpetrators. Although dating violence is perpetrated by both genders, women are more frequently victimized. Dating violence is influenced by various risk factors, such as alcohol use, peer interactions, history of domestic violence, and cultural structure. This situation leads to negative physical, psychological, and social effects, such as low self-esteem, depression, high anxiety, suicide risk, substance and alcohol use, and PTSD.

Considering the physical, psychological, and social consequences of violence, resources should be increased to prevent violence and improve the situation. Differences in the levels of perception and acceptance of violence among young people highlight the importance of protection methods<sup>46</sup>. Primary prevention methods are effective in raising awareness about dating violence and helping young people become aware of and prevent potential violent behaviors in the future. Identifying risk groups is particularly valuable in this regard. It is recommended that gender differences be considered in the education and programs to be organized, given the significant differences observed in attitudes and perceptions towards violence

between genders. Although articles continue to be published, the reporting remains inadequate and more frequent studies are needed for this topic.

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