Dating violence resource for Christian faith-based institutions
Esperanza United has chosen to use “@” in place of the masculine “o” when referring to people that are either gender neutral or both masculine and feminine in make-up. This decision reflects our commitment to gender inclusion and recognizes the important contributions that everyone makes to our communities.

Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse has partnered with Esperanza United to examine domestic and dating violence experienced by Student Populations within Campuses.

---

# Contents

Dating violence resource for christian faith-based institutions ..... 2
Introduction ............................................................................................................. 3
What is dating violence or dating abuse? ...................................................... 5
What does dating violence or dating abuse look like? ............................... 5
Scope of the problem .......................................................................................... 6
Who perpetrates dating abuse and why? ....................................................... 7
Warning signs and red flags ........................................................................... 8
What is a healthy relationship? ........................................................................ 9
Healthy boundaries and consent .................................................................... 11
As a faith-based campus, what do we need to know? ................................. 12
As a faith-based campus, how can we help? ............................................... 13
Where can I find resources? ........................................................................... 15
Introduction

College campuses play an important role in nurturing and shaping young adults and encouraging them on a healthy, positive path. All aspects of the student, physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, are touched by the campus experience. In particular, faith-based campuses aim to provide a context in which students can develop and strengthen lifelong values of compassion and faith.

In the midst of these high ideals, new research about trauma and its long-term physical, emotional, and spiritual effects has provided important insight into human wellbeing. Trauma experienced in young adulthood can derail dreams, undermine trust and confidence, and affect a young adult for decades to come. Toxic trauma, that is, trauma that overwhelms a person’s ability to respond, is particularly harmful.

One common source of trauma in a young adult’s life is an experience of dating violence (also known as teen dating violence, dating abuse, intimate partner violence, or relationship abuse). Across the U.S., 1 in 3 women and 1 in 10 men are victims of dating violence, which is most common in people between the ages of 16 and 24.¹

Young adults on college campuses are particularly vulnerable to dating violence. Tragically, rates of relationship violence on college campuses, including sexual assaults, dating violence, and stalking, are the highest in comparison to any other population. One in 3 college students, or 32%, experience sexual assault, dating violence, and/or stalking.²

In addition to the emotional and physical trauma of dating violence, young adults also experience patterns of abuse in the areas of sexual abuse and sexual assault. Those who were raised in a faith tradition that emphasizes “purity culture,” or the importance of remaining a virgin until married, may experience additional trauma when they experience sexual abuse and/or Rape in a relationship. For example, a young woman who believes that her relationship with her faith and/or her value as a woman is tied to her status as a virgin may have the trauma of a sexual assault compounded by the trauma of this loss of virginity. The survivor’s sense of their own salvation or relationship to their faith community may be completely devastated by a sexual assault that was in no way their fault.

Although these experiences are widespread, taboos make it painful and awkward to talk about them. These taboos may be especially strong among faith-affiliated students. As a result,

¹ https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teendatingviolence/fastfact.html#:~:text=Teen%20dating%20violence%20is%20common.&text=Nearly%201%20in%2011%20female,violence%20in%20the%20last%20year.
² http://jehdnet.com/journals/jehd/Vol_5_No_2_June_2016/9.pdf
many young adults never reach the services and support they so desperately need and deserve, and instead continue to suffer from the trauma of dating violence. Other survivors reach out for help despite the taboo, but are silenced after they are met with disbelief and blame.

Education and prevention can help to minimize the incidence of dating violence and its immediate and long-term traumatic effects. At the same time, compassion, resources, and support can help those who have experienced dating violence. While education and prevention address the whole community, effective individual responses must prioritize the victim and their safety, express compassion, and provide a bridge to expert community services.

It is also important to note that dating looks different in different cultures and faith traditions. In some traditions, dating is not allowed at all. In others, dating is the norm and may be couched in terms of healthy relationships and personal boundaries. There are many variations, but the presence of dating violence throughout all traditions is a fact that faith-based campus leaders, administrators, and others must recognize and respond to. Also, an official policy of “no dating” does not necessarily mean that dating is not happening. This resource has been developed to support faith-based campus leaders and administrators as they explore the contours of this significant problem and identify safe and effective responses, support, and healing from within their own cultures and traditions.

Faith-based campus leaders and administrators can and should be leaders in developing and demonstrating compassionate, safe, and effective faith-based responses to dating violence. This role encompasses community education, prevention, responses to individual survivors, and advocacy for the long-term social changes needed to end dating violence in the future.

Faith-based campuses can be important resources for young adults as they navigate new relationships, learn what “healthy relationships” look like, take notes on what’s happening with their peers, and soak in information. Faith-based campus leaders can also be sources of information, can frame relationships in terms of human dignity and respect, can promote healthy boundaries, and can let everyone in the community know where to turn for help.

Ultimately, this work is a long-term investment in young adults and their future families, friends, communities, and wellbeing.
What is dating violence or dating abuse?
Dating abuse is a pattern of abusive behaviors that occurs over time and is used to exert power and control over a partner in an intimate relationship. For university students, an intimate relationship is a step above platonic friendship that usually includes a significant emotional attachment. An intimate relationship may or may not include sexual relations.

What does dating violence or dating abuse look like?
Every relationship is different, but the things that unhealthy and abusive relationships have in common are issues of power and control. Violent and/or hurtful words and actions are tools that an abusive person uses to gain and maintain power and control over their partner.

Any person on a college campus can experience dating violence or an unhealthy relationship, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic standing, ethnicity, faith, or culture. Abuse can happen to anyone, in any relationship, whether that relationship is casual or serious. Students from marginalized communities, and especially women from these communities, are more likely to be victimized.\(^3\)

College students experience the same types of abuse as other adults, including these listed below.

- **Physical abuse:** Any intentional use of physical force to cause fear or injury, like hitting, shoving, biting, strangulating, kicking, or using a weapon.

- **Verbal or emotional abuse:** Any use of threats, insults, constant monitoring, humiliation, intimidation, isolation, or stalking to cause fear or to establish power and control over a partner.

- **Stalking:** A series of actions directed at a specific person that uses constant following, monitoring, and/or harassment to make that person feel fearful, anxious, or in danger. (Please see Safe Havens’ resource, Supporting Victims of Stalking in Our Faith Communities: Help for Faith Leaders and Congregations)

- **Spiritual abuse:** The misuse of scripture, traditions, religious practices, and/or cultural norms to isolate the partner, force the partner to submit, and/or to assert power and control. This can include justifying control of sexuality and reproduction, restricting the partner’s access to health care and medications, and misusing religious precepts (for example, forgiveness) to keep individuals in an abusive relationship.

- **Sexual abuse:** Any action that impacts a person’s ability to control their sexual activity or the circumstances in which sexual

---

activity occurs, including rape and/or coercion. (Please see Safe Havens’ resource, Supporting Victims of Sexual Violence in Our Faith Communities: Help for Faith Leaders and Congregations)

• **Digital/Technology abuse**: Use of technologies and/or social media to intimidate, harass, or threaten a current or former dating partner. Examples include: demanding passwords, checking cell phones, cyberbullying, sending excessive or threatening texts, or stalking on social media. Often, what happens on social media is outside the supervision of caring adults.

  o **Sexting**: Sharing sexually explicit photos or sexually suggestive messages online or through text. Sexting is abusive when it is forced or unwanted. Examples include sharing a private image without permission or forcing a partner to send messages they are not comfortable sending. Sometimes, threats are used to force a partner to send sexually explicit photos or messages.

• **Financial abuse**: Exerting power and control over a partner through their finances, including taking or withholding money from a partner or prohibiting a partner from earning or spending their money.

**Scope of the problem**

Dating abuse is a public health epidemic that can affect anyone, regardless of their background, age, immigration status, culture, or religious community. However, it is important to note that sexual violence, physical violence, and stalking disproportionately impact young people. In fact, young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience intimate partner violence at rates almost triple the national average. More than half of the women (69.5%) and men (53.6%) who report physical or sexual abuse or stalking by a dating partner first experienced the abuse when they were between the ages of 11 and 24. Tragically, rates of intimate partner violence on college campuses, including sexual assaults, dating violence, and stalking, are the highest in comparison to any other population. One in 3 college students, or 32%, experience sexual assault, dating violence, and/or stalking.

These statistics are staggering, and they don’t even include the two thirds of young adult victims who never report the abuse.

To put these numbers into perspective, over 13 million young people experience dating abuse every year, which is more than the populations of Los Angeles and New York City combined. This

---

widespread abuse is closely connected to other problems facing college students, such as suicide, unwanted pregnancy, and drug use.\(^8\)

College students not only face serious abuse, they also face additional challenges when they reach out for help. When they do report or tell someone close to them about the abuse, they may be belittled, judged, or disbelieved. Peer pressure from other students or campus culture may encourage students to dismiss what occurred and pretend it wasn’t as bad as it was. Parents and other caring adults may minimize the importance of relationships in college students’ lives that have different titles than those used when the parents were adolescents. Often, adults don’t have the necessary information or resources to understand the situation and provide support.

Intimate relationships are critically important to young people and can consume their time in school or on social media. These relationships are just as important as older adult relationships and the dangers are as important as well. It is vital that professors, counselors, parents, faith leaders, and other caring adults listen to young people, speak about and understand the scope of abuse in their relationships, work to prevent future abuse, and learn to respond with support and resources.

**Who perpetrates dating abuse and why?**

Anyone can perpetrate abuse. However, studies have shown that if a child grows up in a home where there is domestic violence their chances of experiencing or perpetrating abuse are increased because abuse is a learned behavior. These children may learn that abuse is normal, okay, or to be expected in their future relationships.

Perpetrators of violence may abuse drugs or alcohol, which can lower inhibitions and make the abuse more severe. It is important to note that abuse is not caused by the use of drugs and alcohol, but it can be exacerbated by their use. Perpetrators also may struggle with mental health issues, such as depression.\(^9\)

In many cases, perpetrators of dating abuse also show love and care for their partner. Most perpetrators are not abusive all the time, and this makes it hard for the victim to navigate the difficult and abusive episodes. Although a partner may express love and care, they’re not showing love in a healthy way when their actions are abusive.

Also, college students are impressionable. Social pressures, peers, and media may influence how they treat their partners. Those who abuse may also have skewed, unrealistic, or blurred ideas of healthy relationships, interactions, and boundaries.

---


These statistics and risk factors reflect the depth and impact of dating violence, both for perpetrators and survivors, and point to the crucial need for prevention education. The first step is to prepare university students with critical skills around healthy communication and boundaries. In particular, faith-based campuses can emphasize the importance of compassion and respect for all people, which is at the heart of many faith traditions. It is also important to prepare caring adults with warning signs, referral resources, and response skills. College students need and deserve support.

**Warning signs and red flags**

Dating today is different than in the past. These differences can mask dating violence.

For example, campus students today use different words to describe “dating.” A young person may instead say they are “talking,” “hanging out,” “just friends,” “casual,” and/or “exclusive.” These are all words used to describe different types of an intimate relationship. Dating violence can occur in any of these types of relationships, regardless of how committed or serious a relationship may be deemed.

If a college student you know says that they are “talking” with someone, it may not be talking in the way you would think. Talking can signify the beginning stages of an intimate relationship in which two young people may be spending time together but have not yet put a formal title on the relationship. At this stage, they may be communicating only or mostly through digital communications like social media. Talking can also describe a more casual type of relationship, or a way to remove association from the formal title of dating. While the relationship may be informal, dating violence can still occur in this stage. Because many parents and caring adults don’t understand the context of these terms, dating violence can remain invisible or misunderstood.

Personal, cultural, or religious prohibitions against dating, rules about dating a particular person, an emphasis on purity culture, or other norms that make it difficult for college students to talk about their relationships can also render dating violence invisible. While well intentioned, these norms can encourage young people to keep their relationships secret. Some young adults experiencing abuse don’t tell counselors, professors, parents, or faith leaders about the abuse because the individual partner or dating itself are not approved.

Also, survivors often don’t want to get their partners into trouble or disappoint their friends or families. This can cause students experiencing abuse to date in secret and suffer abuse in silence.

No two relationships are alike, but there are documented warning signs that may indicate an unhealthy or abusive relationship.
Examples include when a dating partner:
- sends constant and obsessive text messages (“Where are you?” “Who are you with?” “Why didn’t you answer me?”),
- exhibits extreme jealousy or insecurity,
- isolates their partner from family and friends,
- has mood swings or an explosive temper,
- makes false accusations,
- belittles their partner and uses put-downs,
- physically inflicts pain or hurt in any way,
- displays possessiveness or constant pressure, and/or
- threatens suicide or uses other forms of manipulation.

Signs that a young person could be experiencing abuse include:
- withdrawal from favorite activities or from community or campus events,
- isolation from friends, family, or congregation,
- drop in grades,
- depression and fatigue,
- crying constantly,
- changes in attire, especially wearing clothes to cover injuries,
- constantly checking phone, and/or
- anxiety about texts and messages.

The context of the situation is always important. Dating violence is a repeated pattern of behaviors that establishes power and control. If a student has a day when their partner is texting a lot, it could be because of a family crisis or an accident and is not necessarily an indicator of abuse. It is important to consider the entire context of the situation and assess the students’ feelings of safety, boundaries, and fear.

What is a healthy relationship?

Relationships vary from casual to serious, but the bottom line is that all relationships should be healthy, safe, and free from fear. It is important to help young people, in particular faith-based university students, identify what healthy relationships look like.

It is also important to remember that relationships may not always be 100% healthy. There is a continuum from healthy to unhealthy to abusive. We all (young people and adults) work to build and sustain healthy relationships. But sometimes we simply do not “show up” as
our best selves. This is important to understand when working with college students.

Bottom line, no matter how a student may describe their relationship, it is important that they establish a foundation of boundaries, communication, and respect. This is true for their relationship with another person and their relationship with themselves. Healthy boundaries require an assessment of our likes and dislikes and are communicated with a partner.

Speaking about and setting these boundaries can be particularly challenging for college students. Peer pressure to fit in and make friends can put students in challenging situations where knowledge of consent and healthy relationships is critical.

Without education and easily accessible information on healthy relationships, students may not know where to turn to find a model for healthy relationships. They may rely on the media to inform their ideas of what relationships should look like. In the media, boundaries are often blurred, and disrespect and distrust are often the norm. Equality and shared power are seldom modeled. This is why it is so important that faith-based campuses and faith communities create the space to have honest conversations about healthy relationships, respect, and love.

**Healthy relationships are . . .**

- built on trust and open communication,
- respectful,
- honest,
- open to lots of fun, laughter, and good vibes, and
- respectful of boundaries and rights to privacy.

**Unhealthy relationships are . . .**

- devoid of trust,
- filled with blame and guilt,
- marked by jealousy, confusion, and loss,
- disrespectful, and/or
- built on blurred lines and boundaries.

**Abusive relationships are . . .**

- extremely disrespectful and degrading,
- threatening,
- based on fear,
• marked by control, manipulation, and an imbalance of power and control,
• dangerous, and/or
• devoid of boundaries, trust, and communication.

Healthy boundaries and consent

Faith-based campus administrators and leaders value the importance of respect and compassion for themselves and all human beings. Healthy boundaries and consent within relationships help to uphold this respect and compassion. As the previous section mentioned, it is important to teach young people from an early age about healthy boundaries and consent.

Consent is when someone gives permission to another person to allow something to happen. In other words, it is “the notion that we should respect one another’s boundaries, in order to be safe, preserve dignity, and build healthy relationships.” In terms of dating violence, consent is often thought about as being related to physical activity with a partner, such as hand holding, hugging, or touching of any kind.

But consent is not just about physical touch between two people. We practice consent all the time within relationships. For example, when your friend or partner asks if you want to go to the movies and you respond by saying no, you did not give consent to going to the movies. We expect our friends and partners to respect our stated desire to not go to the movies without becoming angry, threatening to no longer be friends with us, or forcing us to go to the movies anyway.

Think about how we give consent to a medical doctor to perform exams and to share our medical information. There are laws in place to ensure our consent is given at all times within the medical realm, so why not in relation to intimate relationships?

Faith leaders and faith communities can begin teaching and talking about consent and healthy boundaries from an early age. Model consent by asking, “Can I give you a hug or high five?” before doing so. During the global Covid-19 pandemic, it became commonplace to ask if you can tap elbows with someone as a way of greeting or if you can lower your mask to eat. Teach young adults on campus that it is okay to express their emotions in a healthy way and that they are in control of their bodies. This helps to lay the groundwork for increased emotional intelligence, so that respect for consent comes naturally as they grow older and find themselves in situations where it is increasingly important.

To make the concept of consent simple, follow these reminders.
1. If it’s not a “YES,” it’s a “NO.” These lines do not blur.
2. It’s important to listen and observe verbal and body language cues.
3. Consent is not a one-time ask. An individual can change their “yes” response at any time and that should be respected.
4. Consent should never be forced, coerced, or manipulated.
5. Consent must be freely given. The individual giving consent must be aware of their decision, conscious, and coherent.

As a faith-based campus, what do we need to know?

Understanding how young people interact in relationships today is crucial to starting the conversation around healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationships on campus. Part of this understanding is recognizing that although we may have standards for when and how students date, the reality is that they are also often influenced by media, peers, and social norms. Many of these wider influences may go against campus values and ideals. For this reason and more, it is important to be active and engaged as we explore how our expectations of college students may differ from their day-to-day realities, especially as they develop relationships.

College students “date” differently! “Old school romance” is not very popular among young people anymore. Students often mock the idea of flowers and cards. So how do they express romance? Through technology? Online dating sites? Sending pics? Social media statuses? Every young person shows their affection and goes public with their relationship in different ways. In fact, some relationships don’t go public at all, or live strictly online or through a phone.

Young adults DO want caring adults involved in their lives. However, they want adults to provide support, ideas, and help when asked, not jump in with a “quick fix” or unsolicited advice. Creating an environment on campus in which young adults feel comfortable in approaching faculty, staff, and administrators with their problems is the best way to show young adults that you are there and ready when they want to talk.

To create this open environment, be supportive and listen. This is especially important because it is so difficult for victims and survivors of dating violence to talk about their experiences. Pay close attention to the warning signs and behavior changes in the young people on your campuses and in your community. Make an effort to start and revisit conversations often.

Approaching someone about an abusive relationship may be difficult. You might have already tried to talk to them, and it may seem like they do not listen. When someone is in an abusive relationship, it is difficult for them to recognize the warning
signs of abuse. Even when they do recognize the signs, cognitive dissonance, the associated threats, fear, embarrassment, or lack of options can make it extremely difficult and dangerous to seek help or get out.

**As a faith-based campus, how can we help?**

If you think a student on your campus is experiencing or perpetrating abusive behaviors, there are ways you can help. The first critical step is to contact the OVW Program Manager on your campus to learn more about the resources and efforts your campus is already undertaking. In addition, here are a few tips for creating opportunities to better help the individuals on your campus.

- **Start the conversation on your campus** – Check in to see if students have considered what it takes to have a healthy relationship. Ask them how they would know if someone were in a “good relationship” and what the signs would be if someone were in a “bad relationship.” Help them identify these behaviors by connecting them to resources or sharing information about signs of a healthy relationship. Create campus events to raise awareness about the signs of healthy versus unhealthy relationships.

- **Be supportive** – Someone experiencing abuse may not recognize the abuse or want the relationship to end. This can be difficult when other people clearly see the signs. When speaking to an individual who approaches you with concerns, be supportive. Do not judge or blame them, keep an open mind, and help them get the resources they need.

- **Provide referrals** – It is important to refer students who are experiencing abuse to services where they can get help and support. Check with your OVW Program Manager to verify the referral protocol to support services on your campus. Keep in mind Title IX and Clery Act regulations. Domestic and sexual violence service agencies, both on and off campuses, provide important services, such as medical and court accompaniment, lethality assessment, safety plans, and support groups. There are also national hotline services to support survivors of abuse such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline’s love is respect hotline which is a 24/7 confidential service available to students via phone (866) 331-9474, by sending a text with the text “loveis” to 22522 or online via chat at www.loveisrespect.org

One important service that an advocate at a support service can provide is help in creating a **safety plan**. A safety plan is a practical guide that helps lower the risk of being hurt by an abuser. It includes detailed information specific to the individual and their life that will help keep them as safe as possible. A good safety plan helps the survivor think through changes in their everyday routines that could keep them safer on campus, at home, and other places they go frequently. A safety plan could help the survivor consider these questions.
• Keep your communication door open – College students need and want you to listen and be supportive. What you see or hear may make you frustrated and worried. If this happens, try to stay calm. Let them know that you want to help and can connect them to resources when they are ready. Make sure you speak to your OVW Program Manager to stay informed on the resources available on your campus.

• When in need, get support – If you feel that a student is in immediate danger or their life is at risk or has been threatened, you may want to get emergency support by calling 911. You may also consider recommending the individual seek support by talking to a counselor, community healer, another trusted adult, or a legal resource. Contact your campus’ OVW Program Manager to know what resources are available. These situations are complex, and there may not be an easy solution.

While trying to support a student, you may also consider reaching out to faith leaders, a mentor, a domestic or sexual violence advocate, or a confidante to talk about your feelings. However, the identity of the young person should be kept confidential unless something has happened that you are mandated to report, the young adult is going to hurt themselves or someone else, or the young adult is in immediate danger. Make sure to check your campuses policies on Title IX and federal regulations on Title IX and the Clery Act to ensure you act in compliance with regulations.

• Communicate with your faith-based campus community – There are many prevention tactics that you can implement within your faith-based campus community to send a clear
message to people experiencing abuse that you care. Create a speakers’ bureau of community members who want to educate others on dating violence. Invite the domestic violence experts from your local domestic violence services agency to host educational events with students. The options are endless and send the message to students on your campus that you care and want to support initiatives that respond to the trauma of dating violence and make a difference in real people’s lives.

Where can I find resources?

There are many resources available to support a young adult who needs help. We recommend first contacting your campus’ OVW Grant Administrator to see what resources and regulations you have in place on your campus. Then, it may be prudent to connect the student to a caring adult, someone they trust and feel comfortable speaking with. This could be a parent, mentor, or another adult within your campus community who can provide ongoing communication, support, and help. Also, check out these agencies for additional resources and information.


- love is respect: Loveisrespects’ purpose is to engage, educate, and empower young people to prevent and end abusive relationships. www.loveisrespect.org.

- If you or someone you know are in immediate danger, call 911.

- If you are in need of help, but not in immediate danger, you can contact one of the following resources. Support is available 24/7 on each of these hotlines.

  - National Dating Abuse Hotline: Call (866) 331-9474 or text “loveis” to 22522 or chat online www.loveisrespect.org.

  - National Domestic Violence Hotline: (800) 799-7233

  - Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN) National Sexual Assault Hotline: (800) 656-4673

If you’re interested in receiving technical assistance or would like further information, email campus@esperanzaunited.org

This project was supported by Grant No. 2016-TA-AX-K051 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.