

Teen dating violence brought to the forefront this February

Written by Darci Tomky

Know warning signs of abuse; help is available in Holyoke

About a month ago, community members gathered in Holyoke to support the family and friends of Kelsie Schelling, who disappeared one year ago on Feb. 4.

As this young woman is in everyone's thoughts and prayers, a post on the Help Find Kelsie Facebook page earlier this month announced February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month, reminding men and women it is their responsibility to bring attention to the potential risks of domestic abuse and to take action against the abhorrent violence against young people today.

TeenDVmonth.org is the online hub hosted by Break the Cycle for the national awareness and prevention month.

According to statistics posted on the website, it's clear why youth across the nation are affected by dating violence.

—Nearly 1.5 million high school students nationwide experience physical abuse from a dating partner in a single year.

—One in three girls in the U.S. is a victim of physical, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner (a figure that far exceeds rates of other types of youth violence).

—One in 10 high school students has been purposely hit, slapped or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend.

—One quarter of high school girls have been victims of physical or sexual abuse or date rape.

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“Surprisingly, there really is a high incidence of domestic violence,” said Nicki Johnson, director of Help for Abused Partners which actively serves Logan, Phillips and Sedgwick counties.

“Our numbers are quite high for Phillips County,” she said.



One in 10 high school students has been purposely hit, slapped or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend, and only one-third of teens who are in abusive relationships ever tell anyone about the abuse. Community members are encouraged to spread the word this February about Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month.

According to the Teen DV Month website, dating violence is a pattern of abusive behaviors used to exert power and control over a dating partner. Every relationship is different, but the one thing that is common to most abusive dating relationships is that the violence escalates over time and becomes more and more dangerous for the young victim.

Teen DV Month emphasizes that dating abuse can happen in any kind of relationship—it

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doesn't discriminate against the length of relationship, gender, ethnicity, religious background, etc.

Abuse can come in various forms. Physical abuse, like hitting, biting, strangling or use of weapons, is intentional in causing fear or injury. Verbal or emotional abuse could include threats, insults, intimidation or stalking.

Sexual abuse is any action that impacts a person's ability to control their sexual activity or the circumstances in which sexual activity occurs. Digital abuse is when technology or social media is used to intimidate, harass or threaten a current or former boyfriend/girlfriend.

Teen DV Month reports only 33 percent of teens who were in an abusive relationship ever told anyone about the abuse. And 81 percent of parents believe teen dating violence is not an issue or admit they don't know if it's an issue.

One of the most important things to do is to tell someone about the abuse, urged Johnson. Whether it is a parent, relative, teacher, counselor, pastor or a helpline, victims need to talk to someone about the relationship!

The following is a list of 10 common warning signs of abusive behavior from [TeenDVmonth.org](https://www.teenDVmonth.org)

—Checking a partner's cell phone or email without permission.

—Constantly putting their partner down.

—Extreme jealousy or insecurity.

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—Explosive temper.

—Isolating a partner from family or friends.

—Making false accusations.

—Mood swings.

—Physically hurting a partner in any way.

—Possessiveness.

—Telling a partner what to do.

Remember, do not ignore these warning signs! Tell someone about the relationship.

If noticing these signs in someone else's relationship, talk to that person or get help from a trusted person to talk to them together.

Either as the abuser or the victim, experiencing dating violence as a teen can have far-reaching effects.

This kind of behavior often begins between the ages of 12 and 18, and the severity of intimate partner violence is often greater in cases where the pattern of abuse was established in adolescence, according to TeenDVmonth.org.

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Victims are at higher risk of substance abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior and further domestic violence. Teen girls who are physically or sexually abused are six times more likely to become pregnant and twice as likely to get a sexually transmitted disease.

Dating violence is misunderstood

As a community member, it is important to look for real solutions to dating violence and not get caught up in some of the common misunderstandings. TeenDVmonth.org points out the following reminders:

—The abuse is never the victim's fault. It is important to remember that nothing a victim does invites or excuses abuse.

—Telling someone to “just leave” the relationship is not the answer. There are many reasons why teens and 20-somethings stay in unhealthy relationships. For one, breaking up can be the most violent time in an abusive relationship.

—Take relationships among youth seriously. Even if a person is young, his or her relationship still matters. Don't risk overlooking the seriousness of dating violence.

—Dating violence happens in every type of relationship, in every community. Anyone can become part of an unhealthy relationship, and no one has a predisposition to becoming a victim of abuse.

—Dating violence isn't just physical. Emotional and sexual violence can be just as, if not more,

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devastating to a young person's health than physical violence.

—Do not advise teens to fight back. When a victim violently lashes out against his or her abuser, the violence often escalates. The abuser may even take that moment to “prove” the violence is mutual and, sometimes, to press charges. Moreover, fighting back does not end the violence. It is much more effective to seek legal help or make a safety plan.

—There's never a point where one should “cut off” a friend who is being abused. Part of an abuser's tactics is to isolate his or her victim. Without a supportive community, the victim finds it harder to leave the unhealthy relationship. Being a good friend, listening and supporting the victim's decisions are the best ways to show him or her that there are alternatives to the abusive relationship.

Take a moment this February to spread the word about Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month. Whether a parent, a teacher, a community member or a teen themselves, everyone is impacted in some way by dating abuse in young people, and it's time to put a stop to this silent epidemic.

Young people can get help for abusive relationships

Locally, one resource to call is Help for Abused Partners at 970-522-2307. This number can be called 24/7 with staff on call and ready to help with any situation.

Patty Heiner, a bilingual staff member with Help for Abused Partners, is in Holyoke every Tuesday from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at the Phillips County Social Services office, 127 E. Denver St.

Both teens and adults can stop in or make an appointment for help in a support group or

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one-on-one counseling, all at no charge. Other arrangements can be made, for example, if a teen needs to meet after school and cannot go during the office hours.

“We will follow them from start to finish,” said Johnson, noting the staff will work with the local victim’s advocate on things like restraining orders and court appearances.

An emergency shelter is also available in Sterling through Help for Abused Partners, or arrangements can be made at a hotel in Holyoke, depending on the circumstance.

Johnson said the staff is available for teen dating violence presentations at schools, youth groups or other organizations, noting she has already spoken at NJC and at high schools in Sterling and Julesburg this school year.

Yolanda Lambrecht of Help for Abused Partners will be speaking at the Holyoke Chamber of Commerce meeting Tuesday, Feb. 25. Anyone is welcome to hear her presentation at the Peerless Center at noon, but RSVPs for lunch are requested to 970-854-3517 by 9 a.m. that Tuesday.

Holyoke Police Department can be reached at 970-854-2244 for non-emergency calls and at 911 for emergencies.

Phillips County Sheriff’s Office is available at 970-854-3644. By calling law enforcement, victims are given a direct route to the criminal justice system. This would allow for things like a crime investigation, mandatory protection services and medical or psychological help with a victim’s advocate.

School counselors are also a great resource for students who need a trusted adult to go to.

Additionally, through a collaboration between Break the Cycle and the National Dating Abuse Helpline, loveisrespect.org is the ultimate healthy relationship resource. Through the site,

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teens and 20-somethings can ask anonymous, confidential questions and figure out their legal rights and responsibilities.

Live chats are available on the website, or a staff member can be contacted by texting “loveis” to 22522 or calling 1-866-331-9474.

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