

Poor grasp of dating violence in college perpetuates 'boys will be boys' views

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Fifty-seven percent of participants reported difficulty identifying what constitutes dating violence. While 100 percent said "physically forcing you to have intercourse" was violent, about 25 percent of participants found coercive sex or "emotionally pressuring you to have intercourse until you give in," acceptable. Credit: Alex Dolce, Florida Atlantic University

Dating violence—physical, sexual, psychological or emotional within a relationship, including stalking—is pervasive on college campuses with far-reaching health implications. One in five women experience a sexual assault in college and students living in sorority houses are three times more likely to experience rape. College students are vulnerable to dating violence because of the influence of their social and living environments.

Researchers from Florida Atlantic University's College of Education in collaboration with Sacred Heart University conducted a study to understand the [dating violence](#) experience and perpetration of [college](#)-age women, as well as how they conceptualize [violence](#) in dating relationships. They also wanted to learn more about the role of technology within their lived experiences, which infuses most areas of American life, especially in dating and romantic relationships. Mobile technology allows 24-hour access, which also facilitates stalking and controlling behaviors.

Results of the study, published in the journal *Violence Against Women*, illuminate the span of dating violence knowledge among the participants and point to a lack of understanding of what constitutes emotional violence. Findings reveal normalization of unhealthy violent behaviors where sexual pressure or sexualized verbal harassment are viewed as an innate part of men, supporting the idea that "boys will be boys."

"Physically forcing you to have intercourse," was endorsed at 100 percent by participants as violent, while "emotionally pressuring you to have intercourse until you give in," was endorsed at 73.9 percent. Both scenarios indicate rape, yet one of them introduced physical dating violence, which was not acceptable to any participant. The other item introduced coercive sex, which was acceptable to about 25 percent of the participants.

Fifty-eight percent of the study participants reported not knowing how to

help someone experiencing dating violence, 57 percent reported difficulty identifying what constitutes dating violence, and 38 percent noted not knowing how to get help for themselves if experiencing dating violence.

A substantially lower percentage of participants reported not experiencing in-person violence, but did report the experience of intimate partner "cyber" violence. Almost every respondent who noted having experienced intimate partner sexual, physical and emotional violence also documented experiencing intimate partner cyber violence.

Participants expressed a decreased sense of personal control over impulsivity and retaliatory behaviors when using technology in relationships, while often justifying the use of this form of violence because of the accessibility of technology. They also described ways in which they were controlled and monitored by partners.

"Unfortunately, the [college students](#) in our study demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the forms of dating violence and its consequences. They also had a tendency to normalize these behaviors, which led to acceptance, rationalizing and providing excuses for these acts of violence. Furthermore, they lacked awareness of support systems that are available," said Kelly Emelianchik-Key, Ph.D., senior author and an associate professor in the Department of Counselor Education within the College of Education.

Study participants failed to mention any resources for psychological services, therapy, prevention programming or dating violence support groups. Only 21.6 percent endorsed the desire to seek help specifically from a counselor, traditionally one of the primary services provided on most college campuses. Instead, study participants turned to peers for help. However, research has shown that peers do not know how to help and fear intruding into someone's relationship.

"Our study findings underscore the need for education and early prevention programs on campuses that give a clear message that violence—in all forms—is not acceptable or normal in relationships," said Carman S. Gill, Ph.D., co-author, professor and department chair in the clinical mental health program, FAU College of Education.

"Moreover, women should recognize emotional violence as a predictor of low quality of life over time and emotional well-being. The importance of understanding [emotional abuse](#) cannot be understated, as research findings illustrate that [emotional violence](#) is just as detrimental as physical violence."

The researchers say that because it is evident that peers play a critical role in student growth and development, interventions such as peer training initiatives, need to be appropriately targeted across college campuses. They also note that to break this cycle, students could benefit from a university/college statement or policy of zero tolerance for all forms of dating violence perpetration, along with clear definitions of the forms of violence.

"By gaining a critical understanding of college women's unique experiences, we can tailor early intervention to meet the individual needs of this population before the violence becomes pervasive and affects their physical and emotional health," said Emelianchik-Key.

More information: Kelly Emelianchik-Key et al, Dating Violence and the Impact of Technology: Examining the Lived Experiences of Sorority Members, *Violence Against Women* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/1077801221998799](#)

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