

Love without Fear; Teen Dating Violence Awareness

Teenage relationships can be fun and exciting. They are an introductory to romance and another step towards independence. They are sources of love, laughs, gossip and heartache. However, they are also sources of danger and abuse. For an increasing number of American teenagers, a violent or unhealthy relationship is their everyday reality. Many are either unaware that it is happening to them, or believe it is “normal”. Some teens even believe that it means their partners “really love them”.

For fourteen year-old Ashley*, her new relationship was something she had never dreamed of. She and Joel* met at a summer camp that they had both attended. Joel was a guitarist three years her senior. Joel was very attentive, constantly at Ashley’s side to open doors or walk her to her next activity. He made her feel beautiful and unique. He often coaxed her to leave her friends and spend time alone with him. Blinded by his romantic gestures, Ashley ignored her friends when they referred to Joel as her “stalker”. Then camp ended and it was time to go home. Joel lived in the state neighboring Ashley’s, but they decided to keep the relationship going long-distance.

As time progressed, Joel became more and more possessive. He called Ashley a minimum of ten times a day and was constantly texting her. When she didn’t answer her phone, Joel would contact her cousins and close friends, interrogating them on where she was and who she was with. He even began to email Ashley’s mother. He told her mother that he truly loved Ashley and was a smart, serious teenager with good grades and plans to go to college. He became increasingly upset when Ashley would spend time with friends, particularly those of the opposite sex. He pressured her to end many of her friendships and even discouraged time spent with her parents. She told herself that this was just his way of being protective and concerned. Ashley’s parents warned her that something wasn’t right, but she refused to listen. She felt that they were being judgmental and not giving him a chance.

Joel constantly reminded Ashley that he loved her, saying that he “couldn’t live without her”. Ashley believed him. He constantly showered her with gifts. His personal website page was a shrine to her. He once sent her mother a song that featured a woman who was murdered and left in a field. The lyrics included lines such as, “I’d do anything to have her to myself...I don’t know what to do when she makes me sad...I won’t let this build up inside of me.” He said this song made him think of Ashley. Joel would constantly ask Ashley to say that she loved him. He would often interrupt their conversations and ask her to say it again. He was constantly questioning her and her mother on when he and Ashley could move in together, when they could be married and when they could have children.

Though he never physically hurt her, Ashley knew that Joel had a dark side. He confided that when he became angry, he blacked out and could not control or even remember his actions. Joel had three younger half-siblings who were part Hispanic, the eldest of which was nine. Ashley often heard him on the other end of the phone screaming racial slurs and other horrible names at them; “Worthless...whore...I wish you would die”. He told his mother that Ashley was pregnant, though in reality they had never had sex.

Joel told Ashley and her parents that he was abused in his home and asked if he could live with them if he ran away. He later recanted this statement, after discovering that he could not live with them or be placed in a foster home close to Ashley. He told her that her aspirations to help others were stupid, later saying that he had done so to “inspire her”.

Joel promised Ashley that he would not ask her to have sex until she was eighteen, but he often pressured her to do other things. He once began to touch her inappropriately and continued even after she told him to stop. She passed this all off as normal teen boy behavior and “just messing around”.

After about five months, Ashley attempted to end the relationship. Joel called her crying, begging and threatening to kill himself. He talked Ashley into feeling unsure about her own decision to end the relationship. Needing approval from her parents and knowing that she had a history of self-injury, Joel instructed Ashley to tell her mother that he had saved her life. Ashley promised him that she would, fearing what he would say otherwise, though she never did.

Ashley’s parents had had enough and told her that it was time to end the relationship for good. They stood by her as she wrote an email to him, explaining that the relationship was over. Ashley initially resented this, but eventually realized that it had been the right decision. Though Joel and Ashley had no direct contact after that, Joel was never far away. He remained in contact with her friends and even her mother for many months, constantly begging for updates on Ashley. His website page still contained pictures of her, her name littered everywhere, though it was now coupled with declarations of Satanism and “sociopathic pride”. When threatened with a restraining order, he asked how long he would be in jail should he defy it. He posted suicide threats on his personal web page, making sure that Ashley’s friends would see them.

The letters eventually died down and things were quiet for awhile. Ashley returned to camp that June for two weeks. Joel appeared the second week. Ashley had friends escort her wherever she went, but Joel was often in the close perimeter. On the third day, she made the mistake of walking across campus alone and Joel approached her quickly. He sobbed to her, asking for hugs that she repeatedly declined. He told her that due to his heightened emotions around her, he hadn’t eaten in days. He declared his undying love for her and promised that he would always wait for her. He made Ashley promise that she would not tell anyone that he was at camp with her. Luckily, a friend noticed him speaking to Ashley and quickly pulled her away.

Ashley’s mother called the camp, who warned Joel to stay away from Ashley. He could often be seen lurking behind the trees near her dorm room. Hoping that all he needed was a bit of closure, Ashley approached him on the last day of camp. The conversation started out fine, but quickly escalated. Joel was not interested in closure. He told her that he had created an alias on a chat room account with which they could communicate. (Ashley and her parents later found that the account contained Ashley’s birthday, religion, hometown, and initials). He told her that his car was fixed and that he would come down sometime to get her. When his mother arrived to take him home, she circled them and took pictures of them talking. He tried to give her gifts, including a necklace and a ring. He had told many of his hometown friends that he would return from camp engaged to be married. Ashley declined each of his requests and refused his gifts. Later that day, Joel snuck up behind her, hugged her, told her he would be seeing her soon and ran off to his car.

When Ashley returned from camp, her parents filed a restraining order against Joel. Though they had only requested the judge to grant two years, they were given five. Ashley and her family have not seen or heard from Joel since, but he remains in contact with her close friends. Ashley is thankful that she got out of the relationship in time, but often feels guilty for allowing it to go as far as it did. She uses her experience as a constant reminder of how close she came to danger.

There are many teens, both male and female, that have experienced situations similar to Ashley's. In fact, a March, 2006 survey conducted by Teenage Research Unlimited for Liz Claiborne Inc. reported the following statistics:

- 1 in 5 teens who have been in a serious relationship report being hit, slapped or pushed by a partner.
- 1 in 3 girls who have been in a serious relationship say they have been concerned about being physically hurt by their partner.
- 1 in 4 teens who have been in a serious relationship say their boyfriend or girlfriend has tried to prevent them from spending time with friends or family; the same number have been pressured to only spend time with their partner.
- 1 in 3 girls between the ages of 16 and 18 say sex is expected for people their age if they're in a relationship; half of teen girls who have experienced sexual pressure report that they are afraid the relationship would break up if they did not give in.
- Nearly 1 in 4 girls who have been in a relationship (23%) reported going further sexually than they wanted as a result of pressure.

It is often hard to see the truth when one is caught up in emotions. Ashley was unable to see Joel's behavior as abusive or unacceptable, despite the many warnings of those around her. She had become close to him and believed that they loved each other. He had manipulated her into believing that it was them against the world. When she tried to be easygoing and understanding, he took advantage of her empathy.

Stepping away and looking back, Ashley now sees how Joel slowly allowed his true colors to shine. She realizes how each and every one of the excuses he gave for his behavior were designed to make her feel guilty for suspecting that he was anything but perfect. Joel always told her that his he behaved the way he did only because he loved her more than anyone else. Ashley has learned that none of these things are expressions of love, but are methods of control and abuse. She sees the many red flags that she had previously accepted as "love", and keeps a close eye out for similar warning signs in the people she currently spends her time with.

Teenage relationships are an important part of adolescence. Everyone deserves a partner who respects and cares for them in every way. If your partner shows signs of aggressive, controlling, stalking or possessive behavior, or if someone you know is abusive or being abused, get help immediately. Abuse is never okay, and it will not get better. Stay informed, know your boundaries and love without fear.

*Names have been changed.
Sources Cited

www.loveisrespect.org