

Teens offer less support when peers disclose severe dating violence

December 4 2007

Teens can turn to their friends for comfort when a relationship goes sour, but if it involves violence, their peers are less likely to help, a new study shows.

Their peers are more likely to be uncomfortable, change the subject and avoid the victim, according to analysis conducted by University of Michigan and Wayne State University researchers.

"Peers might feel threatened when hearing of severe violence because they might fear the abuser or might be reminded that they, too, are vulnerable to severe violence in their relationships," said Richard Tolman, the study's co-author and a professor in the U-M School of Social Work.

The study examined the responses to teens who disclosed dating violence or upsetting but non-violent experiences in their romantic relationships. The survey of 224 public high school students also asked about coping strategies and post-traumatic symptoms.

Adolescents were asked who they talked with about the situation: a friend, their boyfriend or girlfriend, a sibling, a parent, another family member or an adult in school, or no one at all. The study confirms previous research that adolescents are most likely to confide in friends, if they talked to anyone.

When boys disclosed less severe dating violence, their friends were more

likely to minimize the situation. Girls, however, received more nurturing from their friends when they disclosed less violent situations.

"Given that the boys' reported emotional reactions reflected less distress than girls' reactions, it ...may be that (friends) did not perceive the incidents to be as serious because of the boys' presentation," said Arlene Weisz, the lead author from the School of Social Work at Wayne State University.

Daniel Saunders, a co-author and professor in the U-M School of Social Work, said: "The victim's friends might have also responded differently based on what they are taught about the acceptability of males and females asking for help."

The researchers say the study suggests a need for prevention programs that give family and friends effective skills for responding to situations that involve victimized teens. Victims might also benefit from professional help because of the complexity of dating violence, the study stated.

Tolman and Weisz collaborated with Saunders, Beverly Black from Wayne State University, and Michelle Callahan of 360 Strategies in New York.

The findings appear in the recent issue of the *Journal of Adolescence*.

Source: University of Michigan

Citation: Teens offer less support when peers disclose severe dating violence (2007, December 4) retrieved 2 May 2024 from

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