

Abusive men put female partners at greater sexual risk, study finds

August 6 2015, by Deborah Bach

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Abusive and controlling men are more likely to put their female partners at [sexual risk](#), and the level of that risk escalates along with the abusive [behavior](#), a UW study found.

Published in the [Journal of Sex Research](#) in July, the study looked at patterns of [risky sexual behavior](#) among heterosexual men aged 18 to 25, including some who self-reported using abusive and/or controlling behaviors in their relationships and others who didn't.

The research found that men who were physically and sexually abusive to women were more likely than non-[abusive men](#) to engage in behaviors that exposed them and their partners to [sexually transmitted infections](#), such as avoiding condoms and not being monogamous.

Conversely, men who were not physically or sexually abusive, but who used controlling behavior such as dictating who their partners could see or what they wore, were no more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors than men who were not controlling.

The researchers conducted the study to better understand the link between heterosexual relationship violence, which affects women disproportionately, and sexual risk, since heterosexual sex remains the primary means of HIV transmission to women.

Prior research has focused on the link between relationship violence and sexual risk among women, but relatively little is known about the specific sexual behaviors of the men in those relationships, lead author Erin Casey said.

"There's surprisingly little research about heterosexual men in the sexual health field," said Casey, an associate professor of social work at the University of Washington Tacoma. "The research tends to focus on women and men who have sex with men. I think we make a lot of assumptions about what [heterosexual men](#) believe and do."

Co-author Katherine Querna, a Ph.D. student at the UW School of Social Work in Seattle, said the researchers wanted to parse out individual sexual and abusive behaviors to provide a more nuanced picture of how specific types of abuse may influence sexual risks. For example, she said, researchers expected to find that men who reported using controlling behavior only would exhibit an elevated level of sexually risky behavior, but that wasn't the case.

"Sexuality is a venue through which people who use abuse can control their partners, so isolating out those behaviors might help us to understand that," she said.

To recruit for the study, researchers placed ads on Facebook and Craigslist showing racially and ethnically diverse heterosexual couples, and invited men aged 18 to 25 across the U.S. to share their views on "a web survey about relationships with women."

The study's 300-plus respondents, who were paid \$40 each for participating, were asked whether they used abusive or controlling behaviors in their relationships, and about their sexual behaviors—for example, their number of intimate partners and whether they paid for sexual services.

The study uncovered "disturbingly high" rates of abusive and controlling behaviors. About 37 percent of participants reported using physically aggressive behavior toward their partners, and almost 29 percent said they'd used sexual coercion in their relationships. A majority—55 percent—acknowledged using controlling behaviors, either alone or in combination with other abusive behaviors.

The finding suggests that such behavior might not be uncommon among young [men](#), Casey said.

"We need to understand more about the degree to which controlling behaviors are normative or accepted in this age group," she said.

Overall, Casey said, the findings highlight the need to consider a broad range of sexual behaviors in domestic violence and sexual risk prevention programs, and to improve sexual risk screening and education in treatment programs for domestic violence perpetrators and victim services alike.

"This reinforces the idea that when we try to assess for sexual risk, we have to look at a lot of different sexual behaviors and motivators," she said. "If we just look at condom use or monogamy, we might miss the boat and may not understand someone's exposure to sexual risk."

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: Abusive men put female partners at greater sexual risk, study finds (2015, August 6) retrieved 5 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-08-abusive-men-female-partners-greater.html>

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