

Abusive Romantic Relationships

Your university years are likely to be an exciting time in life as you get to know new people, date and experiment with what you like and don't like in a relationship. Although your university years may be mostly fun and exciting, they may also include distressing times, most particularly when you experience the emotional costs of a toxic or abusive romantic relationship. Unhealthy romantic or intimate relationships are a reality that anyone can experience — regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or socio-economic circumstances. It is important to be aware of the warning signs of an unhealthy or abusive relationship. Many university students may not even be aware that they have gotten into a toxic relationship, or they may believe that they can change a partner's bad behaviour if only they try harder to satisfy their partner's needs.

To understand if your relationship may be unhealthy or harmful, ask yourself the following questions: Are you going out with someone who —

- Makes you worry about his/her reactions to the things you say or do?
- Is regularly jealous and possessive, isolates you from your family or friends, or habitually checks up on you?
- Tries to control you by making all the decisions, giving orders, and not listening to your opinions?
- Puts you down in front of your friends or tells you that you would be nothing without him/her?
- Makes you feel like you need to apologise to others for his/her behaviour when he/she treats you badly?
- Gets too serious about the relationship too fast or won't accept breaking up?
- Has a history of failed relationships and always blames the other person for their couple problems?
- Has a history of fighting, loses temper quickly or brags about mistreating others?
- Makes your family or friends uncomfortable or worried about your safety?
- Threatens you, is violent, or grabs, pushes, shoves or hits you?
- Pressures you for sex or is forceful during sex?
- Abuses alcohol or drugs and pressures you to do so as well?

Staying in an unhealthy or abusive relationship can have serious consequences to your physical and emotional health. You might experience unwelcome changes in your eating and sleeping

habits, get frequent headaches, or encounter more distressing emotions, including nervousness, fear, guilt, shame, confusion, self-blame, depression and sadness. Eventually, you may even begin to feel worthless, find it difficult to trust other people or feel frequently disconnected in social situations.

No person, regardless of circumstances, deserves to be mistreated or abused by others — ever. Nonetheless, many people find it difficult to tell other people about the manipulation or outright abuse they encounter in a sexual relationship. They may fear that other people won't believe them or take them seriously; they may feel ashamed about it; or they may believe that they somehow bring the abuse upon themselves. This is commonly a consequence of the abusive messages that they receive from their partner. People frequently believe that a controlling or abusive partner will change with time — but, sadly, this is rarely the case. Your partner may apologise for his or her actions or beg you for forgiveness, but after a while you only find that the abuse continues or even escalates.

Your physical and emotional health while at university are likely to suffer as a consequence of enduring a toxic or abusive sexual relationship. We encourage you to be open with yourself by acknowledging the chronic difficulties that you may be facing in a particular relationship. Break the silence about the abuse you endure, whatever its degree. To begin, talk to any person you trust or who you decide might be helpful to you. You may choose to speak to a trusted friend, lecturer or family member. Likewise, we invite you to make an appointment with a psychologist at the Student Counselling Centre (on the 2nd floor of the Steve Biko Building), where sessions are always private and confidential.