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Implementation of Teen Dating Violence Education Programs in South Carolina High Schools

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Summary

This paper discusses teen dating violence as a prevalent issue in America with a focus on advocacy for implementing a school-based program about dating violence within South Carolina high schools. Teen dating violence within relationships constitutes any abuse that is exerted over one partner in attempts for power and control. As a survivor at the high school age, the goal is to educate teens of dating violence so a reduction of abusive instances decreases, and healthy relationships can be maintained throughout adulthood.

A educational presentation about teen dating violence was created and a pilot presentation was conducted at Dutch Fork High School in Irmo, SC to a class of 16 seniors aged 17-18. An end survey was conducted regarding feedback on the effectiveness of the information presented, their views on violence prevalence, effect of a young speaker close in age to their own, with an open section for comments or additional questions. It appeared that there was a high self-evaluation of the students' capability of identifying aspects of both healthy and unhealthy relationships as well as an overall positive response in having a speaker with relatability in terms of age and as an alumnus of their school.

Abstract

Teen dating violence is a national issue that effects approximately 25 percent of American teens annually¹. The need for teen dating violence education programs within South Carolina high schools was examined on this premise as well as the importance of mitigating the statistics of those adults affected by interpersonal relationship violence and psychological aftermath on survivors. A presentation for students that taught awareness of dating violence, aspects of healthy and unhealthy relationship aspects, and gave resources to aid those in abusive relationships was presented at Dutch Fork High School in Irmo, SC. A survey after the presentation indicated that they felt they better understood the concepts and believed the young age of the advocate survivor helped show the local issue due to the relatability aspect.

I. Teen Dating Violence and Prevalence

Teen dating violence (TDV) is a pattern of behavior that includes physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual abuse used by one person in an intimate relationship to exert power and control over another¹. There is no distinction between TDV in respects to age, race, religion, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation; this is similar to intimate partner violence among adults. Although both men and women perpetrate violence, there is, however, a higher likelihood of females being physically injured in abusive relationships. In 2009, approximately 25 percent of American teens reported experiencing TDV annually, with a strong suggestion that there is a greater number who did not come forward in that study². To contrast, the state of South Carolina only had 8 percent of adolescents report being physically violent to a romantic partner³. The disparity between the two statistics is indicative of a gap in which there is either discomfort in admission of abuse or a lack of knowledge of what constitutes physical abuse.

For the sake of clarity, the violence discussed in this paper will be referencing the combination of physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse. Physical abuse encompasses the actions of any bodily harm to one's partner⁴. This may be the case whether or not the survivor sustains lasting injuries or bruising. The extent to which the survivor was harmed does not lessen the degree of severity of the abuse due to the violent and controlling nature of the actions taken by the abuser. Emotional and verbal abuse are more difficult to identify from a third-party perspective as often the survivor may not be aware that they are enduring this type of trauma. Emotional and verbal abuse are relatively synonymous and will be referenced in conjunction with one another. This form of abuse utilizes words or behaviors to manipulate the survivor into emotional distress⁴. The range is vast and can leave room for some to question if there are gray areas; however, the intention and emotional impact that ensues clarifies if it is abuse. Actions such as "insults, humiliation, ridicule, the silent treatment, and attempts to scare, isolate, and control" one's partner are emotionally abusive⁵. Sexual abuse is often the aspect that survivors are least likely to talk about, as they may feel embarrassed due to the sensitivity of the subject. This type of abuse is any nonconsensual sexual activity in which the abuser uses force, makes threats, or uses other forms of manipulation to persuade their partner into sexual activity⁴.

Abusers utilize these tactics to gain power over their partner. The goal is to control the survivor through a cycle outlined in 1979 by psychologist Lenore Walker as "The Cycle of Abuse" in which there are three stages that lead to the survivor staying in an abusive relationship⁶. While this a commonality among abusive relationships, it is not universal. The start of relationships puts the couple in a "honeymoon" phase in which there is seemingly nothing wrong; the abuser will often use this time to convince the partner that they are perfect for each other in every way. This survivor feels happy in this phase and emotionally depends on the

abuser. The next stage is “tension building” in which the abuser is moody, withdraws affection, and puts down the partner. The survivor, wanting to return to the honeymoon feelings, will try to reason, calm the abuser, and feel as if he/she is walking on eggshells. This is followed by an “acute explosion” in which the emotional or physical abuse is at a high. Here, the abuser will physically or sexually assault the partner or have a large outburst of anger in which property is destroyed. The survivor still tries to reason through the abuser’s actions and may even decide to leave at this point. However, the cycle does repeat in which the abuser may feel remorse and return to the honeymoon phase. After an explosion, the abuser will apologize, promise to improve him/herself, give presents, or cry to earn back trust and move the relationship along. Even if the survivor left, they often return since they are emotionally attached to the partner and wish to see the relationship? get better. It may seem unlikely that a survivor would remain in such a relationship; however, it takes on average seven attempts to leave after the “acute explosion” until the survivor is able to leave entirely from an abusive relationship⁷.

While studying teen dating violence, it is important to understand the motives behind each partner’s decisions. The abuser’s intent in the relationship is control over the other person, as stated previously. This often stems from a lack of control in their personal life or a sense of being inferior that has stemmed from childhood. About one-third of abusers come from abusive homes⁸. This relationship between witnessing or experiencing abusive behavior may traverse to their later romantic partners. Being around abuse seems more normal to those who grew up around it. Witnessing one parent deal with their emotions through anger or aggressive actions while the other makes excuses, can cause individuals to believe that this way of life is appropriate and expected.

Difficulties in Leaving Abusive Relationships

While the cause of the pattern of behavior for the abuser is more widely accepted, the survivor's decision to stay in the abusive relationship is often questioned repeatedly. This point is essential in the argument for education of teen dating violence since society has the tendency to raise its individuals to survivor-blame. This phenomenon is when the survivor of a crime or any wrongful act is held entirely or partially responsible for the harm that befell them.

Awareness of survivor-blaming has been gaining traction in news in terms of sexual; however, it is still widely experienced among survivors. In terms of TDV, rather than focusing on perpetrator accountability, often the survivors are asked why they remained in an abusive relationship. The implication that the pain they endured was the result of their choice to not leave is harmful and causes survivors to become more ashamed to reveal their stories for fear of being ridiculed. This internalized shame is evident in the fact that out of all adolescent survivors, only 8.6 percent seek help⁹. Abolishing the taboo stigma around teen dating violence would allow for a greater number of survivors to reach out for help and enter a period of emotional recovery. This can be achieved by starting the conversation centered around dating violence, with healthy relationship signals in the periphery, to open the doors for familiarity with the topic and encourage comfort when discussing sensitive issues.

Survivors are also discouraged from speaking up due to the drastic increase in danger during that time. It is under-stressed just how violent a abuser can become if they feel as if the object of their control has the potential to leave. In attempts to gain back control over their partner, they may threaten to harm themselves, the survivor, or other loved ones¹⁰. These are further forms of emotional abuse. The justified fear from threats of physical violence give valid reason for the survivor to remain in the relationship. The most dangerous time for a survivor is

when leaving the abuser¹⁰. Most domestic violence homicides occur when the survivors threaten to leave or after the action of leaving¹¹.

Other reasons that survivors remain in a relationship with their abuser is the emotional connection or love for the partner. The abuser is an expert manipulator and often uses tactics to convince their partner that they are the only individual who understands them and will ever love them. This is done through direct words or even isolation of the survivor from his/her friends and family¹¹. Isolation can be a slow process in which the abuser gradually convinces the survivor that friends and family do not have his/her best interest at heart, and they often create an ultimatum in which there is a strict choice between the relationship and outside relationships. Feeling separated from loved ones reinforces the perception of staying in the abusive relationship as the best choice.

A survivor may also remain with their abuser is a direct consequence of the abuse cycle. There is a combination of love and hope that the abuser's behavior will change. The aforementioned "honeymoon phase" includes the abuser apologizing and making amends for the explosive behavior of the phase prior. In this state, they will promise to seek professional help and appear genuinely remorseful for their actions. Human nature pushes individuals to have hope in one another—it is the patience and love that the survivor has for the abuser that prompts the decision to remain in an abusive relationship. This commonality of this thought process, especially in women, is another reason that education is vital¹¹. Rather than allowing individuals to grow up believing that it is their responsibility to "save" or help their significant other, it should be taught that their individual happiness should be prioritized and to value themselves above all others.

II. Need in South Carolina High Schools

The state of South Carolina has been in the top ten states for women killed by domestic violence since 1996, often ranking first¹². This, along with the fact that 41.5 % of South Carolinian women and 17.4% of South Carolinian men will experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime, has raised the question of how to alleviate these crimes since current policies clearly have not supported the decline in intimate partner violence rates¹³. This need of teen dating violence education is directly related to interpersonal relationship violence that is experienced in adulthood. The effect of dating violence, therefore, remains consistent throughout adulthood and puts individuals at a greater risk for development of anxiety, depression, or trauma disorders¹¹. Learning to identify the signs of unhealthy relationships gives teens the chance to exit a relationship that could eventually turn abusive without the right knowledge.

The high school age (14-18 years old) is the typical age where people are in the identity vs confusion stage of Erikson's psychosocial development model and are on the cusp of thinking through intimacy vs isolation¹⁴. According to Erikson, at this point humans are in the young adulthood stage and are in search of a romantic partner. It is important to teach healthy relationship habits before entering this crucial stage so that these students can have successful relationships. Ideally, the elementary and middle school age groups would also have education programs specified in a differing area of emotional and mental health. For example, the elementary aged children could receive education on proper identification of their emotions and healthy coping mechanisms that would better prepare them for the stressors of life. Middle school aged students could further develop their positive coping mechanisms with an emphasis on mindfulness. It is important to specify that healthy emotional development is a lifeline

learning process and would be most effective if taught throughout adolescence rather than exclusively to the 14–18-year-old age group. Development of children in their own emotional intelligence alongside traditional instruction is a value that would better society by production of well-rounded, happy adults.

However, the focus of this paper is on education of high school aged students to alleviate the emotional barrier that many adults face in dealing with difficult subjects. Rather than placing the sole responsibility on emotional development and healthy relationship skills on guardians, public schools may work with all students. This approach provides equal opportunity for all students despite their varying homelife. While a student may have grown up in an abusive household and have a normalized view of abuse, the goal is to educate all students to provide them an understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in relationships.

As stated previously, the average survivor attempts to leave an abuser 7 times before being able to completely end the relationship. This startling statistic emphasizes the necessity to begin education as soon as possible. The logic is as follows: as teens are empowered and educated on healthy relationship signs, they will gain the confidence to recognize potential danger and remove themselves from the relationship before there are serious consequences. The hope is to reduce the number of instances that people return to abusive partners and cause these relationships to end sooner than the historical timeline.

After a survivor endures any kind of abuse, there is often decades worth of healing along with other lasting trauma¹¹. The duration of these effects is due to the difficult nature of the issues/healing process. The survivor, among other things, must learn acceptance, learn to love oneself again, and learn to gain back independence. Furthermore, the length is exacerbated by the length of the relationship. The recovery process for a survivor may span decades after a

marriage of five or more years¹⁵. Many individuals, at that point, would be well into their working years and emotionally recovering for the majority of their adult or middle-aged life. The statistics indicate that there is a high probability that some teens have or are experiencing dating violence. It has been shown that 40 percent of teenage girls, ages 14-17, report knowing someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend¹⁶. Reaching out to these students and giving them resources on how to safely exit that relationship will mediate the healing process. Since these survivors will be able to have help at a younger age with a shorter length of history in enduring violence, the hope would be that they can recover and still enjoy a happy quality of life for the majority of their adulthood.

III. Current Studies

There have been studies that evaluate both the attitude change and behavior change within students after receiving a variety of dating violence courses in regards of legalities, psychological implications, and the importance of seeking help for survivors. All studies discussed in this paper have concluded positive results and are across varying ethnic and population density demographics within America, so a generalization to public schools in South Carolina is feasible. Studies that reflect an attitude shift include a 12-session dating violence and sexual assault prevention program in which a 6 month follow up saw significant positive changes in attitudes and maintained knowledge about domestic violence¹⁷. Furthermore, a similar 5-session school-based dating violence prevention program produced outcomes that signified a distinct difference between the baseline attitudes and control groups¹⁸. The groups that received the sessions showed a decrease in justification and acceptance of dating violence even in terms of female-to-male violence. However, there was not a waiting period after the sessions which

does not allow for discussion of retention of the information. To improve upon the work that has been done on attitude changes, a longer, longitudinal study must be conducted. It does appear consistent that holding multiple sessions for teaching dating violence is effective in giving more time for the students to take in as much of the information as possible.

Studies that evaluated the behavioral changes over time concluded that school-based programs that teach awareness of dating violence are a useful tool in decreasing physical violence patterns from participants. Two notable studies with the programs Safe Dates and Fourth R have looked at changes over longer periods of time¹⁹⁻²⁰. Each of these programs have multiple sessions with a mix of teaching styles from presentations to skits to showcase examples. Four years after the Safe Dates program, those students were observed with reduced physical and sexual dating violence¹⁹. The effect on verbal and emotional abuse was not recorded, so future studies may need to investigate this application in post-program observation or as an additive to the curriculum. After the Fourth R program, there was a reduction in physical violence among those who received the program versus the control group two and a half years later²⁰. While other conclusions were not drawn, it is notable that this program had aspects that also taught healthy relationship skills and extended the lessons to teacher awareness. These additional aspects should have been looked at to see if they increased healthy relationship styles alongside reduction of physical violence. While both behavioral studies looked at participants multiple years after the programs, a longitudinal study would evince their points further and the ability to observe changes throughout time would be enacted. Checking the reduction of dating violence throughout the lifespan of the participants at five-year intervals, for example, would be the most conclusive way to determine permanent attitude and behavioral influences of the programs.

IV. Education initiatives

The aspects of a pilot presentation is outlined in the following section. The intent is for it to be delivered with a live speaker—online or in-person—who can speak on both the information on the slides as well as share personal stories. Ideally, a speaker close to the high school students' age would be present. There is suspected to be a connection between retained knowledge and a personal relationship with the educator in personal matters such as discussing TDV. Relatability is a key aspect of the education preference for this system so that the message is conveyed as particularly prevalent rather than a dismissed idea from an individual who was not a teenager around a similar timeframe as the audience.

As an overview, the presentation addresses the following: what is a healthy relationship?, what is teen dating violence?, warning signs of a harmful relationship, how to address issues, and resources for help. The presentation begins with the definitional relay of what teen dating violence is and its prevalence as presented in part I of this paper. A clear definition aids in raising awareness of what exactly constitutes abuse, the differing types of abuse, and the impact of TDV in the local area, within South Carolina high schools. The goal is to inform students of the severity of TDV within their own region to inspire a conversation that is rid of taboos. After a definition of dating violence, prevalence, and examples of types of abuse, the key aspects of what constitutes a harmful relationship versus a healthy relationship is presented. While this may be a gray area to discuss, the main take away from this section should be identification of warning signs that a relationship includes manipulation that could escalate to physical violence or more severe forms of emotional abuse.

Enabling students to identify early signs that could indicate future harm to their mental or physical health aids in mitigation of future instances of violence. Conversely, teaching aspects

that constitute a healthy relationship and teaching students the respectful way to treat a significant other promotes a proper understanding the how healthy relationships function. This aims to target those who come from a home life where this was not an idea that was expressed to them whether it be because of growing up in an abusive home or one where love was expressed through negative emotions. This way, those with backgrounds that typically have a higher chance of being in a harmful relationship may learn the skills necessary to question those tendencies that may be inherent to them.

The ending of the presentation provides information on local contacts for help should they or someone they know find themselves in an abusive relationship. Locally, there are women's shelters that can aid in the legal processing if necessary as well as free counseling such as the Cayce, South Carolina based organization, Sistercare. The more general contact would be the National Domestic Hotline number and website. There is also information on how to address another individual if they suspect any harm in a relationship or are trying to console a friend such as defined by Sistercare in their handout "Helping a Friend or Relative".

V. Survey Results

A pilot session was conducted for a class of 16 high school seniors aged 17-18 years-old at Dutch Fork High School with a follow-up survey to evaluate effectiveness of the presentation. As myself and my abuser were an alumnus of this high school, a personal connection was able to be established early on. Telling my personal story of being a survivor who endured abuse at their age allowed for the realization that abuse does occur in their community.

The first five questions on the survey included statements to which the participant indicated the degree of their agreement from 1-4 with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 4

indicating “strongly agree”. most of the individuals indicated that they “strongly agreed” with the statements “I feel that I can identify aspects of a healthy relationship” and “I feel that I can identify aspects of an unhealthy relationship” with 87.5% and 81.3% of responses being a 4. For both statements only one of the students indicated a 2 response. Similarly, the statement “I would trust the sources given at the end of the presentation to seek help if needed” garnered 87.5% of participants to select a 4 with only one individual indicating a 2. The next statement was “I feel that I could appropriately address TDV issues if I was concerned with my own, or a loved one's safety”. All participants indicated either a 3 or 4 for this statement with 68.8% indicating a 4. The final statement using this scale was “I feel that TDV is a relevant issue to my school and my community”. The distribution had no students indicate a 1, 12.5% indicated a 2, 43.8% indicated a 3, and 43.8% indicated a 4.

The survey also showed that the class universally felt that having the speaker or another advocate close in their age would be beneficial due to comfort levels of speaking to someone about their issues. Finally, 75% participants felt that the speaker’s age (22-years-old) aided the impact of the information given. The responses for reasoning were varied but the most common responses were that the small age gap allowed for a more natural connection to the presenter and that the information appeared more relevant through a peer’s judgement and personal experiences. The remainder of the students believed that the speaker’s age did not change the impact of the information given. The responses gave the reasoning that this was because dating violence is a striking and important subject which is age independent.

VI. Conclusions

The overall presentation and final survey of the students indicated a strong preference for a speaker or advocate of a similar age group to them. This is seen in the unanimous agreement that a young advocate contact would be beneficial in alleviating the stressor of contacting an expert in the field. The positive responses of the speaker's age aiding the impact of the message also provides support in that a younger advocate allows easier connection and a tangible quality to the issue. While all survivor's stories are emotionally jarring in a way that shows the listeners the reality of domestic violence or TDV, hearing a story from someone close in age and from the local area puts a solid face to the issue. The relatability is more likely to be achieved in this scenario with a deeper meaning associated to their experiences as the students are likely able to see some of themselves in the speaker. This information that was gathered can be utilized to encourage development of a team of young advocates and survivors to share their stories to raise awareness more directly. A stipulation of this initiative is that young survivors often are not in a position where they are comfortable sharing their stories. As stated previously, it can take years of hard work for a survivor to feel emotionally ready to discuss their experiences and longer to accept their past and move forward. With this timeline, it may prove difficult to find young survivors who have had the time to process their trauma. However, as more young advocates step forward and can speak up, others may follow suit through their inspiration. To begin what could become a semi self-fueling cycle, it only takes a small number of survivors to reach out and offer mentorship.

The consistency in the greater number of individuals who agree or strongly agree with their ability to identify healthy or unhealthy relationships and feel that they could address TDV issues shows that the information in the presentation had a positive impact. To work towards

increasing the number of students who strongly agree with the statements, a more clear and concise definition of healthy and unhealthy relationships can be executed. There were no questions during the discussion of aspects of healthy and unhealthy relationships. Prompting a spotting point in which questions are encouraged could have given the space for clarification if need be. It was also found through informal discussion after the presentation that more examples of specific actions that were healthy or unhealthy would have been helpful. Incorporation of these modifications may create a clearer image to future students.

The statement on the same scale with the widest range in terms of spread was “I feel that TDV is a relevant issue to my school and my community”. While it was accepted that the statistics presented were accurate, there was still a level of disconnect between the vast number of teens who suffer through dating violence and its impact in the local area. Statistically, it is improbable that their specific school would be exempt from the South Carolina average of teens involved in dating violence. This indicates the stigma of discussing teen dating violence is ever prevalent and causes the issue to diminish in value to those not involved. There will always be a need to raise awareness for TDV and to be able to notice signs of an individual in an unhealthy relationship with abuse.

In all, there is promise with education of high school students in the prevalence in TDV. The need is present in the discrepancy between statistical instances of TDV and generalized awareness from current high school students. The best chance at erasing the stigma and encouraging survivors to speak up stems from the development of an educational program to be implemented in high schools throughout South Carolina and eventually nationwide. The requirement of a short course designed to educate students about TDV, and aspects of healthy/unhealthy relationships would open the discussion in a way that is not shameful or

singles out anyone. Furthering this pilot presentation and subsequent survey to more classes throughout South Carolina would provide a greater basis for analyzing the need and effectiveness of the information. Growth of this initiative into a nonprofit organization with the mission to spread awareness of TDV to high school students is a future point to be investigated.

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