Warning Signs of Abuse: Name Calling

Everyone jokes around and teases their family and friends, as well as in dating relationships. However, there's a line between being playful and insensitive or mean. What happens when "teasing" goes too far?

One of the biggest red flags of an unhealthy or abusive relationship is name calling. By verbally stating "you're bad" in some form -- dumb, ugly, stupid, fat, unloveable -- a dating partner can exert their control and hold power over the other person's sense of self-worth.

Dating partners who use verbally abusive behaviors like name calling will often act as though nothing has happened, because they feel in control after insulting their partner. The systematic criticism is what takes it from name calling to verbal abuse -- it's a repeated pattern that, over time, can make the victim believe the insults, making it harder for them to leave ("no one will love me because they said so").

Beyond name calling, dating partners exhibiting verbally abusive behaviors may belittle their partner, either privately or publicly, or disguise disparaging comments in jokes. They may follow up comments with more judgment and criticism ("you're too sensitive") or act as though what they've said is trivial ("I was only joking"). Other examples of name calling include putting someone down, making them feel guilty, or embarrassing and humiliating them.

Healthy relationships don't use name calling to resolve conflict or express love. Both partners compliment or use words to make each other feel good. It's relaxing and fun, and neither tries to "prove" they are the only ones that will ever love them. Instead, each partner sets boundaries on what's acceptable behavior, including what nicknames or jokes are okay.

Recognizing these early warning signs can make the difference between staying in an unhealthy relationship that worsens over time, or ending it and being in one that's healthy. Hurtful words are designed to do exactly that -- hurt. Remember, it's never the victim's fault.