Know the Signs: Spotlight on Isolation from Friends and Family

According to a recent study published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 21 percent of high school girls and 10 percent of high school boys have been physically or sexually assaulted by someone they dated. While we often hear about the harmful impacts of physical or sexual abuse in a relationship, we do not hear about the ways in which emotional or verbal abusive behaviors can be used in a relationship to manipulate or control a dating partner. Emotional abuse is still abuse and with it comes a host of other abusive behaviors and impacts. Non-physical behaviors such as insults, manipulation, humiliation, intimidation and more constitute emotional abuse, but one of the biggest red flags of dating abuse is when someone isolates their dating partner from their friends and family.

Isolation can start subtly, such as a dating partner telling the other what activities are okay to join, insisting that a dating partner “check in” to see where they are at all times, or telling a dating partner to quit activities because the only thing that should matter is their relationship. Another way isolation can affect a dating relationship is through financial abuse - when a dating partner controls how the other partner earns or spends money. A dating partner who is using abuse financial behavior may tell a survivor to get a new job or to quit a job because it is taking time away from the relationship. In these cases, a survivor may be completely dependent on their partner financially.

By using isolation as a method to cut a dating partner off from family and friends, the partner who is using abusive behaviors has a greater amount of control in the relationship. Isolation can also create the space in a relationship for the partner using abusive behaviors to escalate other harmful behaviors. Ultimately, the survivor may feel like they have no one to talk to about the abuse they are experiencing, leaving a dating partner without a support system during their greatest time of need.

What can you do to help if you see your friend, child or student becoming isolated by a dating partner? If someone you know is experiencing isolation in their relationship, you can help them understand that they have the right to their own life. Share with your friend, child or student that it is always okay to turn off their phone or to take a break from communicating with a dating partner. Let that person know that they have the right to do what they want with their time and that a dating partner should never pose an “it’s me or them” choice.
Most of all, don’t give up on someone who is experiencing abuse. Even if you think the person is pulling away, reach out to them. Let them know you are still in their life, willing and able to support them on their own terms. If someone cannot, or will not, discuss their experience with you, let them know they can ask to speak with the TIX Coordinator at titleix@centralaz.edu or reach out via phone, or text to one of our peer advocates, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Dating abuse comes in many forms, but it’s important that all young people experiencing abuse know that they are not alone.