

## DANGER SIGNS

WORRIED that your loved one or friend is in an abusive relationship? Here is what to watch out for:

■ **Isolation:** Does the person have fewer friends than she did before meeting her boyfriend? This could mean that her boyfriend is abusive and is trying to isolate her, first from her friends, then from regular outside activities, and then from her family. She can then become emotionally dependent on him, and find it difficult to leave.

■ **Emotional changes:** In the early infatuation stage of any relationship, girls are often happy. Once the boy becomes abusive, she begins feeling sad and desperate. She may cry more or want to be alone.

■ **Constant communication:** Does the boyfriend constantly call or text her, and must she call him back immediately?

■ **Jealousy issues:** You might notice the boyfriend's jealousy. If she looks at or speaks casually with another man, does he get upset? Did he tell her that he loved her early in the relationship? This is his "hook". Your loved one or friend might find this romantic, but it could be another red flag for jealousy.

■ **Need to impress:** When he gives her "advice" about her choice of friends, hairstyle, clothes or make-up, notice if she is following his every word. She is likely to be in complete denial and may be in fear of what he will do to her if she does not change.

■ **Making excuses for him:** She might stick up for her boyfriend, defending his words and actions. Don't let her denial force you to ignore your gut instincts.

### What can you do to help?

- Listen to your child/friend.
- Don't blame or put her down.
- Let her know that violence under any circumstances is unacceptable.
- Express your concern and support.
- Encourage her to seek help, even if she has not faced any physical violence.
- Call Pave on 6555-0390 for professional help.

SOURCE: PAVE



# When love hurts

## Survey shows one in three respondents has been in 'unhealthy' relationships

By RADHA BASU  
SENIOR CORRESPONDENT

THOUSANDS will celebrate Valentine's Day today, fanning the flames of romance and proclaiming devotion.

But a new survey of 344 young people here has shown that love and courtship are not always the best of times for those involved.

It found that 118 – or about one in three – of those interviewed have been in relationships that experts deem "unhealthy", where a partner uses hurtful language, is controlling or even violent.

The survey was commissioned by the Centre for Promoting Alternatives to Violence (Pave), a non-profit group that fights interpersonal violence.

The marketing division of Singapore Press Holdings, which conducted the survey, approached a total of 530 people, but only 344 had been in relationships before.

The respondents filled up a seven-page questionnaire on dating.

The interviewees, aged between 15 and 34, were all unmarried when the survey was conducted between April and May last year.

The survey threw up several other interesting findings:

■ At least one in four of the 344 respondents began dating between the ages of 13 and 15; some even 12 or younger.

■ More than two-thirds of the 118 experienced negative behaviour first in their teens. Of this group, one-third had been in two or more such negative relationships.

■ Nearly 60 per cent continued to date the same person, despite frac-

has come across cases where victims put up with obsessive jealousy, a slap or two or deliberate put-downs in the hope that partners will change. "But that seldom happens."

She said it is worrying that nearly 60 per cent of the respondents in unhealthy relationships said their partners controlled who they met, where they went and what they wore.

"Dating violence often starts with people who control their partners. Jealousy or obsessively keeping tabs on someone is not love," said Ms Seah.

That children as young as 10 are dating these days – and being ex-

**"Dating violence often starts with people who control their partners. Jealousy or obsessively keeping tabs on someone is not love."**

Mrs Seah Kheng Yeow, Pave's head for family development

posed to negative behaviour while still in their teens – is also troubling. Studies overseas have shown that younger people in relationships are more prone to falling into a cycle of abuse.

Pave's study showed that about seven in 10 of those who were in unhealthy relationships shared their

of it that often does not mean it does not exist," said the Fei Yue Family Service Centre's director for counselling Rachel Lee.

Often, experiences shared by teenagers who come in for counselling on boy-girl issues show that they were victims of abusive relationships. "Many of them come in after bad break-ups, but the signs of abuse are there," said Ms Lee.

Dr Carol Balhetchet, director of youth services at the Singapore Children's Society, agreed. Up to a fifth of the 250 at-risk teenagers who are counselled by the Children's Society each year exhibit "control issues", though they are not explicitly referred for that.

"They might be here because they have run away or dropped out of school, but the underlying issues of aggression or controlling behaviour with regards to a girlfriend or boyfriend are definitely there," she said.

Meanwhile, the few who do seek help for dating abuse are getting younger, pointed out chief executive officer of Ain Society Mohd Yusof Ismail.

He recently counselled a 16-year-old whose mother brought her in after the teen was punched in the face by an angry boyfriend. She had been seeing the boy since she was 13 and as the relationship progressed, he had become increasingly possessive, stalking her and obsessively checking her mobile phone.

He would also hit her. Her mother, who noticed her bruises, wanted to go to the police, but the girl resisted, saying her boyfriend, whose divorced father had just remarried, was going through a difficult period.

However, when the boy went to

## EARLY START

SOCIAL workers at the Centre for Promoting Alternatives to Violence (Pave) reckon that in close to half the 700 or so spousal violence cases they see each year, the abuse started when the couple were still dating.

In some cases, the women marry their partners in the hope that they will change, pointed out Pave's head of casework services, Ms Soh Siew Fong.

In other instances, the women are coerced into marriage because the men threaten suicide if they break up.

These are sure "warning signs" that the relationship is unlikely to work out, said Ms Soh.

Many women in love, she said, often believe their husbands will change.

"Unfortunately, that hardly happens." Instead, many of these women endure years of abuse before finally coming forward, said Ms Soh's colleague Bavani Pillai. In the case of one woman she counselled, it took more than 15 years.

The woman was working as a waitress in a restaurant; her future husband, a businessman, was a patron.

Shortly after they began going out, he forced her to quit her job, which he thought was "demeaning". Instead, he advised her to go for skills improvement courses and later helped her find an office job, which he deemed more respectable.

"He gradually cut her off from her old friends and way of life, but she felt indebted to him because he got her a better job," said Ms Pillai. When he proposed, she readily said "yes".

One night shortly before their wedding, when he saw her leaving her office with a colleague, he accused her of having an affair.

He slapped her, but she attributed it to insecurity.

"She thought that if she married him, he would be more secure in their relationship. So she went ahead with the wedding," said Ms Pillai.

Shortly after marriage, her husband made her quit her job, saying she did not need to work as he would provide for her. They went on to have two children, but the abuse continued.

Eventually, she sought help from Pave after more than 15 years of marriage. By then too, she found out that her husband had had numerous affairs.

"Ironically, she said she could handle the abuse but not the affairs," said Ms Pillai.

The couple are now divorced.



tious fights.

Given that every relationship has its angry outbursts and ups and downs, where should potential victims draw the line?

"Fear is a clear warning sign," said Pave's head for family development, Mrs Seah Kheng Yeow. "Is your boyfriend so controlling or does he scold you or threaten you so much that you are scared of him? Then you should seek help."

Mrs Seah, a senior social worker,

woes, mostly with friends or their mothers. Fewer than 5 per cent confided in teachers or counsellors.

Pave, which specialises in dealing with abuse, gets about 10 cases of dating violence a year. However, phone inquiries on the issue are on the rise - from around seven calls in 2005-2006 to 45 calls last year.

By and large, however, counsellors report very few cases of dating abuse.

"But just because we don't hear

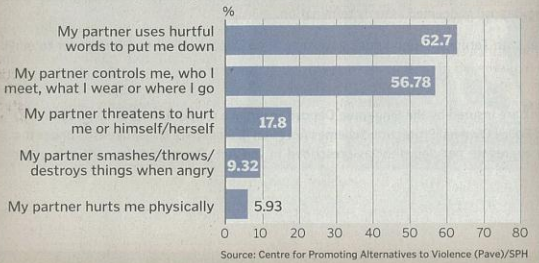
a hospital where she was doing an attachment as part of her secondary school course and beat her up over an imaginary boyfriend, she came to her senses. Her mother made a police report and the girl agreed to go for counselling.

"Being embarrassed in front of others was a wake-up call for her," said Mr Yusof. "She knew she must end it - or there could be no end to the violence."

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## TROUBLED TWOSOMES

Roughly one in three out of 344 young people surveyed here has been in unhealthy relationships. Here is what they faced:



## SHE HOPES THE WORST IS OVER

MS SITI Maimunah (not her real name), 26, was 15 when she began dating her brother's friend who was three years older.

Like most teenagers, they would hang out at the malls. Occasionally, she would go to his home to watch television.

As the months passed, Ms Siti noticed that her boyfriend was becoming increasingly possessive. He would insist on picking her up from school, to ensure that she did not spend time with male classmates.

One evening, she answered a phone call from a male classmate while watching TV at her boyfriend's home. He flew into a rage and began punching and kicking her. She fled in fear.

Three months later, when she answered another call at the void

deck of her housing block, he beat her up again. This time, she told him she was breaking up with him.

The next day, he sent her white and red roses and a teddy bear. But she was not mollified. "I realised that it could only get worse."

She stopped taking his calls. Not long after, he began his national service and stopped pursuing her.

But Ms Siti's nightmares did not end there. When she was 24 and working as a nurse in a local hospital, she married a "kind and caring" technician she met on Facebook, after just three months of dating.

She became pregnant soon after. Struggling to make ends meet, the couple would frequently argue. At first, he would only yell at her. Then he began throwing things.

Later, he started hitting her.

"Any little thing could set him off," said Ms Siti, who is unemployed. She began chronicling her past and present pain in a diary, which he discovered last November.

"Rather than get angry, he broke down and cried," she said. "I think he felt bad for me and said he would try to change."

He has not laid hands on her since. And she hopes the worst is over.

Even when they are dating, victims of physical violence can find it hard to make a clean break, pointed out senior social worker Seah Kheng Yeow at the Centre for Promoting Alternatives to Violence.

"The perpetrators often promise to change - and the victims live in the hope that they will," she said. "But that often does not happen."