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Teens Often Lack Tools to Deal with Abuse

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By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff

When Keisha Ormond talks to high school students about dating violence, she starts by asking them whether they have ever been in a verbally or physically abusive relationship or known someone who has. Time and again, the response is the same.

“More than half raise their hands,” said Ormond, who works with area teenagers through a Roxbury-based dating and domestic violence program. “They know what dating violence is, and they know what it looks like. But they often don’t know what to do about it.”

The horrific slaying of an 18-year-old woman in Wayland - allegedly at the hands of her former boyfriend, a high school classmate who is accused of strangling her, slashing her throat, and dumping her in a marsh - may represent the most extreme expression of a deep-rooted problem, those who work with teenagers say.

While details of the couple’s three-year relationship remain murky, specialists say that adolescents cope with emotional and, in severe cases, physical abuse more often than many adults may realize.

Inexperienced in dating and overwhelmed by conflicting emotions, teenagers often struggle to escape abusive relationships or even to recognize them for what they are.

“I don’t think it occurs to them that someone who cares about them can hurt them,” said

Katy Colthart, a clinical social worker in Needham who counsels teenagers in abusive relationships. “They think they are too young, and they don’t have anything to compare it to. So they overlook the warning signs that could lead to something physically dangerous.”

While murders involving teenage couples are exceedingly rare, lesser forms of violence are alarmingly prevalent. In a nationwide government survey in 2009, close to 10 percent of high school students report being hit, slapped, or physically hurt by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the previous year. Girls are disproportionately affected. One in three adolescent girls is a victim of physical, emotional, or verbal abuse from a dating partner, according to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. Other studies have suggested even higher rates.

Specialists said that such statistics undercut notions widely held by parents and teenagers alike that young couples are immune to familiar patterns of adult domestic violence.

“We all want to think our kids are safe in being in a relationship,” said Mary Gianakis, director of Voices Against Violence, a Framingham domestic violence and rape crisis center. “But the data tell us that one in five teens reports being physically and/or sexually abused in a dating relationship. It’s really scary and very sad.”

On Monday, the body of Lauren Astley was recovered in a marsh in Wayland, and the next day police arrested her former boyfriend, 18-year-old Nathaniel Fujita, on murder charges. The couple had dated for three years before Astley broke off the relationship in April, and authorities say Fujita had become withdrawn and angry in recent weeks. Fujita and Astley had continued to see each other periodically and had made plans to meet Sunday, shortly before she went missing, police said.

Astley's father said the couple, who started dating when they were 14, developed a deep bond and were devoted to each other. Authorities say they have not found any evidence that Fujita and Astley's relationship had a history of abuse.

But teenagers who are in such relationships are often reluctant to tell their parents, teachers, or friends, specialists say. As a result, the scope of the problem is largely hidden, making it harder for teenagers to step forward.

"They start to feel they might deserve it, and they worry about what people will say," Colthart said. "When people don't talk about something, it's easy to sweep it under the rug."

Teenagers often fail to spot the warning signs in an dysfunctional relationship, specialists say, because they confuse controlling behavior with signs of affection. Some girls, for example, will see a barrage of e-mails and text messages from a boyfriend, many of them angry or accusatory, as normal or even attentive.

"It's often their first significant relationship, and they have trouble identifying when things cross the line from healthy to unhealthy," said Gerry

Leone, the Middlesex district attorney who is prosecuting the murder case against Fujita.

Leone, whose office has worked closely with schools on the issue, said that while the nature of abusive relationships varies widely, the problem is widespread. But relatively few teenagers alert adults, he said.

"Underreporting is definitely a problem," he said.

Meanwhile, memorial services for Astley will be held July 16 at the First Parish church in Wayland, her father said yesterday.

Astley was an active member of the First Parish community and volunteered through the church to help repair damage from Hurricane Katrina for three consecutive years, he said.

The service will include "just a couple of different perspectives on Lauren and how she connected with the community, and ways we can all cope," he said.

Fujita's lawyer, William Sullivan of Quincy, said the Fujita family has been reluctant to talk publicly about their son because they do not want to say anything that could inadvertently cause the Astley family more pain.

Yesterday, Casey Donlan, who recently completed her junior year at Wayland High School and knew Astley through the tightknit Muses a cappella group, said the pair appeared to be a normal, happy couple.

After the breakup, Astley "didn't seem devastated" but told members of the group that Fujita was acting immature and seemed unhappy, Donlan said. Fujita tried to win Astley

back with flowers and better behavior, and she agreed to resume the relationship. Fujita took her to senior prom. But by the end of the year, Donlan said, the relationship seemed to be more a friendship than a romance.

For many high school students, romantic relationships come to define their identity and social status, making the idea of being single seem calamitous. Teenagers who have been in steady relationships for years often struggle to imagine life without the other, specialists said. In small towns, changes are likely to cause even more disruptions to the status quo.

The vast majority of violent relationships had signs of trouble along the way, specialists said.

“People don’t just snap,” Gianakis said. “It is an extremely rare case without previous indications of an imbalance of power in the relationships.”

Many teenagers, particularly girls, find it hard to let strong feelings go and stay in unhappy relationships with the hope that the situation will improve.

“It’s all new to them,” said Emily Rothman, a dating violence researcher at Boston University’s School of Public Health. “And like everything else in life, it takes practice.”

Rothman said despite the prevalence of dating violence, parents are far less likely to discuss it with their children than issues such as drugs and alcohol. That needs to change, she said.

“It’s not really on parents’ radar screens when you sit down to have ‘The Talk,’ ” she said. “But it’s hard for kids to learn how to deal with it.

We have driver’s ed, but no one’s required to have relationship ed.”

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