

# “Is this Abuse or Warning Sign of Abuse?” Activity

**Recommended Age: 12+**

## Goals

- To learn about abusive behaviours and warning signs.
- To provide an opportunity to discuss myths surrounding who can be affected by dating violence.
- To emphasize the importance of ‘trusting your gut.’

## Have Ready

- Warning sign cards (see below for examples).

## Instructions

- Divide youth into groups of 2-3 people.
- Choose a variety of scenarios and pass out cards.
- Ask youth to try to imagine that they are hearing these statements from a good friend who is in a dating relationship. Remind them that abuse can happen in all types of relationships between any gender of folks who are dating. Ask youth to decide if the behaviour is abusive, a warning sign, or whether it depends, and explain why they thought that.

## Warning Signs Cards

### Verbal/Emotional Abuse

*My partner gets jealous when I talk to (or text) certain people. (Warning Sign/It Depends)*

Jealousy is a normal feeling that most people sometimes have. It's not your job to 'fix' the feelings or make them go away (e.g., you don't have to stop talking to people/texting, going on social media, or going to parties to make your partner feel better). In healthy relationships, it's important to take responsibility for those feelings. **Healthy ways of dealing with jealousy are**

**recognizing it is a normal emotion and understanding we are capable of healthy and respectful reactions, no matter what the situation.**

*My partner puts me down in front of my friends and apologizes after, or will say they were just joking. (Abuse)*

Insults or put-downs are disrespectful and emotional/verbal abuse. If people are insulting or humiliating you in private or in front of your friends, and then say 'just kidding,' it doesn't take the hurt of those comments away. If you decide to date someone, you have a right to be respected.

*My partner is unhappy with the way I look or dress. (Warning Sign)*

The only person you have to please with the way you look is yourself. If you and your partner continually argue about your appearance or your partner tries to control what you wear, this can be abusive. No one has the right to control your appearance. Telling someone how to dress (or what to do) is controlling behaviour. Your partner should be happy with the person you are and not try to mould you into someone else. Trust your feelings and talk to your partner about what their comments are really about.

### **Physical Abuse**

*My partner held my wrists once when I tried to leave. (Abuse)*

Restraining is physical abuse. We may get unhealthy messages from the media that holding wrists and trying to 'passionately' solve problems is 'romantic,' but no one should keep you somewhere against your will. You have the right to safely leave any situation. A partner who holds your wrists or arms, blocks your way, locks car doors, or prevents you from leaving in any way is behaving abusively. It is not romantic, it's controlling.

*My partner hits the wall and/or throws things when they get angry. (Abuse)*

It is not okay for a partner to act scary or to use intimidation, even if they are angry or if you are having a fight. This is abusive behaviour, whatever gender your partner is. Trust your own instincts when it comes to your feelings of fear or discomfort.

### **Spiritual Abuse**

*My partner makes fun of my spiritual beliefs. (Abuse)*

Having different spiritual beliefs is okay. However, if someone is being made

fun of because of their spiritual beliefs, feeling like they can't practice their spiritual beliefs, or being forced to change their beliefs, this is abuse.

## **Sexual Abuse**

*My partner refuses to use a condom/sex dam. (Abuse)*

Everyone has the right to have safer sex. If someone is always making excuses for not wanting to use a condom/sex dam, or lies about using one, it means they are not respecting their partner. If someone wants to use a condom/sex dam, not using one or pressuring them not to is sexual abuse.

*My partner likes to give me hickies. (It depends)*

Hickies can be a fun, no-risk way of showing affection if there is consent. However, hickies (and other markings) can be controlling and abusive if there isn't consent. It's important to ask and talk about what each partner is comfortable with and to respect boundaries.

*My partner asked me to send them naked pictures. (It Depends)*

Asking is okay, as long as they are respecting the answer. If consent is happening (meaning both people feel comfortable), then sharing pics is okay, with the understanding that they belong to the person(s) in the photo, and are not to be shared with anyone else. Also, if you take pictures/videos, avoiding identifying features, such as your face, markings, tattoos, etc., and using messaging apps that delete pictures/videos once viewed can help you stay protected. If the answer is no and your partner keeps asking or pressuring you, this is disrespectful, controlling, and abusive behaviour. It is not okay to pressure to send or share the photos without consent. Consent can be withdrawn at any time. Check out [www.thatsnotcool.com](http://www.thatsnotcool.com) for help to stop digital dating abuse. It is not your fault if someone is sharing pictures without permission. If someone has shared your pics, talk to an adult you trust or check out [www.needhelpnow.ca](http://www.needhelpnow.ca).

## **Financial Abuse**

*My partner wants to borrow money all the time and doesn't pay me back.*

*(Warning Sign)*

This is an example of financial abuse. Giving money willingly to a partner is fine. The abusive aspect of this scenario is the fact that the partner is asking to borrow money and then not returning it. You have no obligation to lend/give

money to anyone if you do not want to. Situations where you feel you want to give your partner money, but they are not asking for it, are different than when your partner doesn't pay you back when they ask for a loan. You should be talking with your partner about your feelings about spending money on them when they have none. Feelings of guilt/responsibility may or may not indicate a situation where one partner is being taken advantage of.

*My partner buys nice things for my friends and family. (It Depends)*

If the person is just trying to be nice and buying presents for your family and friends, it is not abusive. However, if someone is nice to their partner's parents, family, and friends, but treats their partner badly when they are alone, this is an example of abuse. This situation makes it harder to leave because everyone is telling you to stay with the abusive partner since they appear to be so nice.

## Debrief

- We often hear reasons or excuses when people act abusively. **“What types of reasons do people give for behaving abusively?”** They can't help it, they were drunk, they just 'lost control', this is how relationships are, they were 'just joking', because they love you, they are just trying to 'protect' you, etc. These are all excuses. Excuses blame the person who is being abused, and the person using abuse is not taking responsibility for their behaviour. Using abuse is a choice.
- If someone is experiencing abuse, it is not their fault.
- Sometimes abuse in relationships can be hard to identify and is not as obvious. Encourage youth to trust their feelings and instincts when it comes to their relationships. If youth feel confused/unsure about the relationship or feel gross/scared/trapped because of things that are happening, trust their instincts as a primary warning sign of abuse, and get help/support.

## **Additional Activities**

Ideally, this activity can be followed by:

- Action Planning Activity
- Qualities of a Healthy Relationship Brainstorm
- Fun and Single Relay Race