

Unhealthy intimate relationships: what are the experiences of young people in the UK, and what can be done?

Warning: This document contains quotes of a sensitive nature. If you experience any distress, please contact either of the organisations listed at the end of this document.

You may remember, back in 2019-2020, you took part in a research study organised by the University of Bristol. You were approached because you had suffered from abuse either in a past relationship, or growing up within your family home. You took part in at least one interview, where you talked about your experiences of this abuse, but also about your life more generally. As a valued participant of our study, we'd like to share the main findings with you.

What was the aim of the study?

To build a picture of what young people who have been abused might experience over the course of their life, and what might be done both to prevent abuse, or help those that have already been abused, in future.

Who took part?

20 people aged 19-25 took part in detailed interviews (including you).

We also used data from a separate study (the ALSPAC study: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/alspac/about/>), where 3,279 people (aged 21) completed short questionnaires.

What did we do with the data (information)?

The person who interviewed you first anonymised the information so no one would be able to identify you. They then went through the interview data to look for the main 'themes' in what was said.

At the same time, an analyst used statistical methods to summarise patterns in the anonymised questionnaire data.

The wider research team then spent time looking at both interview themes and questionnaire patterns and wrote up what they found. We also had young people with lived experience of abuse give feedback about how we did our research and help us to understand our findings.

What did we find?

- Listening to young peoples' life experiences prior to relationship abuse helped us to better understand what helped them.
- Many participants had been victimised in lots of different ways while growing up, and had negative experiences when trying to seek help.
- This had left them lonely and vulnerable to more abuse including an abusive intimate relationship. And this was often worse for already vulnerable people (for example, if LGBTQ+, ethnic minority, or living with a disability).
- For all patterns of abuse in intimate relationships, these nearly always included some form of emotional abuse.

BUT

- They kept going and fought for what they wanted: education goals, children, a better future.
- They told us about what helped and what would help others in the future.

A summary of the main findings is shown in the table below. The quotes are typical of how people talked about each subject.

Findings from the Interviews	Example quotes	Finding from the questionnaires
Chances of experiencing an abusive intimate relationship		
<p>We recruited people who had either been in an abusive relationship and/or grown up in an abusive family home.</p> <p>Over half the participants had experienced <u>both</u> kinds of abuse.</p> <p>Often people did not realise that what they were experiencing was abuse – especially control – from their partner.</p>	<p><i>Basically, my dad was physically abusive of my mum in front of us, that led to me living with my nan. Me and my nan had a very difficult relationship... she [Nan] can be a bit cold-hearted, at times. She doesn't mean to be, it's just the way that she is because, as well, she went through exactly the same with me ending up in quite a few domestic [violence] relationships, involving drugs, money, whatever happened.</i></p> <p><i>But at that time I didn't actually realise that he was genuinely being controlling and...I didn't actually realise until I took my phone into the police station to be checked and to read through the messages that he had been doing it from day one</i></p>	<p>Around one-third of young people had been in an abusive relationship.</p>

Findings from the Interviews	Example quotes	Finding from the questionnaires
Factors growing up		
<p>Young people who had been multi-victimised often talked about addictions, poor mental and physical health and anti-social behaviour within the family.</p> <p>They also often reported being stuck in a 'loop of loneliness' – they felt isolated and lonely growing up, but when they asked for help (for example, because of problems at home), they were often not believed or supported well, and so felt more isolated.</p> <p>Participants linked deep feelings of loneliness with how easy it had been to end up in an abusive relationship.</p> <p>This made them more vulnerable to further abuse including being coerced by partners into sex or taking drugs.</p>	<p><i>Well, my parents were alcoholics. My mum and my real dad split up when I was three, or something stupid. Then we didn't see him from the age of six to fourteen. So, for about eight years, he was absent, and my mum remarried. He was great. My stepdad was amazing. He just drank. He got liver disease. My mum was a bit of an alcoholic, abusive, and a bit neglectful..</i></p> <p><i>when I went home to my mum [from care], I got into a relationship with Jaeden quite quickly, who is my daughter's dad. I still didn't know where my head was with things, really, and felt a lot of loneliness. I was trying to find a place of belonging, I guess, and I jumped into my relationship quite quickly, and then fell pregnant.</i></p> <p><i>this happens, abuse, you do find your way to being a target for more abuse.</i></p> <p><i>the whole [grooming] stuff I think was, again, being lonely. Because, obviously, I got back with ex time, and time, and time, and time, again for the fact of being lonely. And then I got in with [older girls, grooming] because I thought, "Friends," like.</i></p> <p><i>I was waiting at a bus stop. He was on his break, and he thought I was fit. He asked me how old I was. I didn't ask</i></p>	

Findings from the Interviews	Example quotes	Finding from the questionnaires
	<i>how old he was...and because I was severely lonely... I mean severely...And he was the first guy to listen to me</i>	
Mental Health Issues		
<p>Participants talked about having mental health problems from early in life. These usually started at the same time as abuse from in or outside the family.</p> <p>it wasn't always easy to talk about mental health issues to do with early years abuse or abusive intimate relationships with friends or professionals</p>	<p><i>I've had depression all my life as well, from when I got bullied in school, really.</i></p> <p><i>I would struggle, I think, to go to any of my friends. I've always struggled to go to my friends and... Say, if there has been an issue with something with my mental health. I just don't... They're not health professionals, how are they going to be able to do anything? I don't know. I feel like I've had a lot of not great friends.</i></p> <p><i>I don't know, I guess, I worried a bit [health professionals] would just be like, "She's being a baby," and, "Get over it. Get on with it." I don't know, it's that fear, like, that you are just totally open. Almost how you feel when then somebody doesn't validate that. I think that is really, really hard and I had a lot of that before. So, it made me very nervous to say to anyone because there is a lot of, "Everyone gets sad," and it's like, "But I'm trying to explain that it's different. There is something different."</i></p>	<p>Young adults who suffered abusive relationships later had depression symptoms that were twice as strong as those who didn't suffer abusive relationships.</p> <p>Statistical models suggested that these young people also had stronger depression symptoms earlier in life, before the abusive relationship started.</p>

Findings from the Interviews	Example quotes	Finding from the questionnaires
<p>What Can Help (This had not been asked about in the questionnaires)</p>		
<p>Specific courses focussing on all aspects of abusive relationships (including how to leave safely), run by unjudgmental staff.</p> <p>Interview participants said they would have liked clearer information when they were younger and in school, about what counted as abuse.</p> <p>Seeking help from health professionals could be made easier</p>	<p><i>They [Freedom course facilitators] are really, really good, just to show you all the different traits of a man..., you've got loads... the head worker, controller, persuader, the liar... and how it affects the [your] child.</i></p> <p><i>I think that I really, really, struggled to understand or pinpoint controlling behaviour and mental abuse.</i></p> <p><i>For me, there were a lot of blurred lines between being friendly and what okay and what was playful and, actually, what was malicious and wrong.</i></p> <p><i>School should do more awareness, but maybe when you're 12 and then all the way through. A bit like the Freedom [programme]. It should be like that.</i></p> <p><i>going to the doctors can be a scary thing. Saying 'I feel depressed,' especially with me, when I don't see the same doctor, it's really hard to build those relationships with doctors ...having to explain the same thing over again, you get to a point where you just don't bother. So, I think these services need to make themselves a lot more approachable.</i></p>	<p>Not applicable.</p>

Findings from the Interviews	Example quotes	Finding from the questionnaires
<p>When talking about their experiences of abuse or seeking help, young people found the most supportive and helpful relationships were ones which felt more 'equal'</p>	<p><i>Being with [support worker], it's really boosted my mood...I think it's because I see her every week. She always says to me 'Do you want me to wear my badge? I said 'Oh, I don't want you to wear it.' We just go out for a coffee, do shopping. We do everything together, like your sister would...I couldn't get better help from her. She is absolutely awesome.</i></p> <p><i>I saw him [disability support worker] weekly throughout the time I was [at university]... he was brilliant... It was just 'What is best for her?' Like having a dad at university. I didn't need someone to condemn [partner], I needed someone to support me. That is what he provided.</i></p>	
<p>Having one friend, family member or teacher who believes and supports you really helps</p>	<p><i>There's one friend that has stuck through me, through in and out. She'd give the world for my kids, same as I would hers.</i></p> <p><i>Joe was always a very good friend anyway, and he said, "You need to leave." And I left - Joe he came and met me and stuff, and if it wasn't for that, I don't think I would have left.</i></p> <p><i>my nan was my universe, so I lived with my nan... And I felt safe, for some years I felt really safe.</i></p> <p><i>my tutor was amazing. She was the one that I told...She was just really nice. She was so sweet</i></p>	

Findings from the Interviews	Example quotes	Finding from the questionnaires
<p>Any achievements in education give people self-esteem and a chance to move out of their situation</p>	<p><i>[School was] My little safe haven- you know, wondering what the hell was going on at home. I came out with seven 'A's and nothing below a B. So, it worked, I suppose. (Laughter)</i></p> <p><i>I think I just had this absolute, utter determination to get myself the life I wanted. A good job, enough money that I would never be in a position where a man could hold my money</i></p>	

How do our findings help?

They show that:

- abusive relationships are a big problem among young people – it was very common and typically the abuse was not just a 'one-off' event, particularly for women.
- there are a range of factors that can mean a child or teenager is more vulnerable to abuse later, key ones being mental health problems and feeling isolated and not listened to. Organisations that aim to protect and support young people should take this into account.
- there is more than can be done in terms of teaching children and teenagers about healthy relationships so abuse can be called out, or so someone can feel that they can seek help.

How have we shared the findings?

- We are giving feedback to the participants of the interviews (including you), participants of the questionnaire study, and the Medical Research Council, the organisation that funded this work.
- We have published several articles in scientific journals (free access):
 - [Risk factors for intimate partner violence and abuse](#)
 - [Patterns of psychological, physical, and sexual victimisation and perpetration](#)
 - [Those victimised may be more vulnerable to depression](#)
 - [The loop of loneliness, being silenced, and vulnerability among those victimised](#)
- We are producing a report, that we will share with organisations that can have an influence on how young people in abusive relationships are helped. These include intimate partner violence and abuse organisations, such as Safe Lives (<https://safelives.org.uk/>), and NextLink (<https://nextlinkhousing.co.uk/>).

We want to thank you again for taking part – without you, research into improving young peoples' health and wellbeing would not happen.

If you are affected by any of the issues raised in this section, you may wish to contact:

Women's Aid: chat.womensaid.org.uk (Live Chat: Mon-Fri 8am-6pm, Sat-Sun 10am-6pm);
helpline@womensaid.org.uk (Email support)

Men's Advice Line: 0808 801 0327 (Freephone: Mon-Fri 10am-5pm);
info@mensadvice.org.uk (Email support)