"It was very scary": Fear in young women's accounts of adolescent dating abuse

Candace W. Burton, PhD, RN, FNE
Assistant Professor of Nursing
Virginia Commonwealth University
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A majority of adolescents aged 13-18 report involvement in an intimate or dating relationship.

65% of US female adolescents report experiencing dating or intimate partner abuse (IPA).

IPA has been linked to numerous adverse mental and physical health outcomes—these include depression, unplanned pregnancy, substance abuse, suicidality, & reproductive coercion.

The experience of ongoing fear related to adolescent IPA has not been well described.
The purpose of this retrospective recall study was to develop better understanding of the experiences and life health consequences of abusive dating relationships for young women.

- Data were collected via questionnaires & semi-structured interviews.
- Interviews were recorded and transcribed and a thematic analysis technique applied via ATLAS.ti.
- Themes emerged from raw data through iterative inference and extraction, involving review of recordings and text.
Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th></th>
<th>Interviewed Subsample</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Min/Max value (n)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Min/Max value (n)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current age (years)</td>
<td>25.9 (5.25)</td>
<td>19.0/35.9 (97)</td>
<td>26.16 (5.44)</td>
<td>15.4/19.0 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at time of abusive relationship (years)</td>
<td>16.31 (1.67)</td>
<td>11/20 (100)</td>
<td>15.7 (0.95)</td>
<td>14.0/17.0 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of relationship (months)</td>
<td>36.42 (31.3)</td>
<td>1.0/120.0 (99)</td>
<td>38.1 (25.61)</td>
<td>3.0/96.0 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time since relationship (years)</td>
<td>9.64 (5.45)</td>
<td>0.73/22.37 (97)</td>
<td>10.46 (5.29)</td>
<td>4.32/19.41 (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity:</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Frequency (n=10)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latina</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Thematic coding matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open code tags</th>
<th>Clusters</th>
<th>Thematic family assignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Number one fear  
  So scared  
  Scared to death  
  That was scary  
  Scared to lose  
  He used to scare [it] out of me  
  You’re afraid | Feeling afraid  
  Living in fear | Fear for self |
| Feeling trapped  
  A very strenuous job  
  It’s a lot of stress  
  Scared to lose  
  Riding a roller coaster  
  Didn’t want to lose him | Managing the situation | Fear for other relationships |
| I still duck  
  I can’t stop worrying  
  I got paranoid  
  Not knowing what’s going to happen  
  It really gets me  
  It just scares me  
  Freaks me out | High alert  
  What might happen | Fearful expectation |
Theme 1: Fear for Self

This theme emerged from descriptions of fearing injury or loss during the abusive relationship.

“I kept coming back to him, because he used to scare... me. He used to call and say that he was going to pour kerosene around the house... and that he’d light it on fire while I was sleeping...”

“So probably after a month or two of whatever..., he started to get very jealous and always wanted to know where I was, and it was pretty scary because I had never really dealt with anyone like that before.”
Theme 2: Fear for Other Relationships

- Fear for Other Relationships described concerns about **how others’ views of her might change** if the IPA were exposed.

- “For a while there, I had it made. I was the ‘it girl.’ And after things went south with us, I was still the It girl, because to everyone else, we never lost that…even when things went south towards the end …we always tried to maintain that perfect couple image. There were a couple times when it broke, like when he screamed at me in…school…. He preferred to break me down in private.”

- “Whenever his family’s around, or my friends, I just wanted to hide. Because of the way he was keeping me under his thumb, and everyone…seeing it.”
Theme 3: Fearful Expectation

- Fearful Expectation described fear of things that might yet occur.

“And if I’m ever with a friend and her boyfriend…I’ll feel them out to see how they are, just because I don’t think anyone should tolerate [abuse].”

“I’ve got three children, so...sometimes I think of all this as a blessing, to keep me...[aware] of what’s going on with my children because I’m really going to make an effort to find out what’s going on in their lives...their teenage years.”

“And to this day I still don’t like to be around drama, or fights or anything else, anything loud. It really gets me, my stomach goes into knots....”
Conclusions

Fear is a significant, lasting experience among young women following adolescent IPA.

It is crucial for healthcare providers to understand how young women experience fear related to IPA in and after adolescent relationships.

Increased understanding of the persistence of fear can inform development of health intervention strategies for young women following adolescent IPA.
Thank you!

Questions?


