

Written by: WRAP Staff

With Valentine's Day quickly approaching it is important to discuss what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like. Oftentimes, things that may initially be seen as "cute" or "romantic" can lead to unhealthy behaviors in relationships. Something that might start out as innocent such as "my partner always wants to spend time with me" can lead to "my partner won't let me leave the house without them." Another example would be your partner telling you what to wear. Maybe they say, "I don't like it when you wear a tight shirt because someone might check you out." These seem like innocent comments that come off as protective or loving. Another example is "I don't like when you talk to that specific friend. They make you act differently." Although this seems harmless, and you may feel they are doing this in your best interest, it may be done because they feel threatened by this friend. They may try to do this to also start to slowly isolate you from friends and family. The more isolated you are the more you will rely on your abuser, giving the abuser more power and control over you. But far too often these initially "protective" comments and actions can turn into controlling and abusive behaviors.

One behavior this is very dominant is stalking. Often times when someone starts stalking a victim they may possibly be at the same places, or maybe show up at your house, or send you gifts. You may tell your friends and they might say that it's "romantic" or "sweet". Stalking progresses. It starts with gestures that feel normal or exceptional. It increases and starts feeling overwhelming. Stalking is being harassed or persecuted with unwanted and/or obsessive behavior. If you are not wanting this attention it is not "cute" or "romantic", it's stalking. Stalking behaviors can become very scary. It is important to recognize behaviors like stalking for what they are. Dismissing these behaviors as something they are not can lead to dangerous situations.

Abuse doesn't happen overnight, but is something that slowly builds over time, often with changes you might not notice, until you step back and look at the whole picture. Many times we hear those who have not been in abusive relationships say "I would've left if they told me what to wear" or "I would've left if they told me I couldn't talk to my friends," but the control is justified under what looks caring, protective, or loving.

Abusers continually try to gain more power and control over their victims. This can look different for every relationship. Some abusers may try to gain power and control by verbally abusing their victim, other abusers may do this with physical abuse, or combinations of different forms of abuse. "Dating abuse is an attempt by abusive partners to gain or maintain power and control, and it comes in many forms. Abuse usually isn't isolated — it forms a pattern of behaviors that collectively make the victim question their own self-worth and become further entrenched in the abusive relationship" (LoveisRespect.org). There are many types of abuse or ways for an abuser to gain control. Some types include economic abuse, using coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, verbal abuse, physical abuse, minimizing, denying and blaming, using privilege, or using the children. These are all ways that an abuser may try to seek more power and control over the victim.

It is important to recognize what healthy relationships look like and to be aware of unhealthy behaviors in relationships. It is valuable to understand what a healthy relationship looks like. Healthy relationships include honesty, trust, respect, and open communication. Healthy relationships should have no imbalance of power. Both partners need to respect each other's independence and decision-making. If you are making decisions out of fear of retribution or retaliation, or fear these even when making decisions, it is not a healthy relationship. Being aware of what is healthy and unhealthy will allow you to see these behaviors for what they are. You should not minimize behaviors that are intended to

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show control and power over you. Over time these controlling actions can turn into a dangerous relationship.

It is essential to understand what makes up a healthy relationship and what leads to an unhealthy relationship. Understanding some of these examples may help you recognize these signs if you come across them. Ensure that you communicate your expectations of a healthy relationship with your partner, and make sure your partner understands that there should be a balance of power between you. Remembering that if boundaries need to be respected.

<https://www.loveisrespect.org/everyone-deserves-a-healthy-relationship/power-and-control-dating-abuse/>