

Nude photos and cruel messages, teen digital dating abuse grows

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Allyson Pereira, now 21, says she experienced digital dating abuse in high school. A study shows 1 in 10 students received a threatening message from a partner, and government officials say digital dating abuse is a growing problem in schools.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Study: 1 in 10 teens received a threatening cell phone message from their romantic partner
- Digital dating abuse can include sexting and controlling your partner's technology use
- Allyson Pereira, now 21, says she experienced digital dating abuse in high school
- Organizations such as Liz Claiborne and MTV have launched education campaigns on the issue

(CNN) -- There were no scars, no bruises to indicate the abuse Allyson Pereira, a 16-year-old high school sophomore in New Jersey, had suffered.

Her emotional pain was caused by her high school boyfriend, who blitzed her with cruel comments via instant messages, e-mails and MySpace, calling her ugly and accusing her of cheating.

Then, he dumped her. A month later, he changed his mind.

She said he gave her an offer: Text him a naked picture of herself, and he would get back together with her.

Pereira, now 21, regrets sending her boyfriend the topless picture that was subsequently forwarded to other students in her high school. She never expected the image would be spread like wildfire.

"I was so ashamed, embarrassed and mad," she said. "Someone actually came to me and said 'You're Ally. Is that you?' "

The boyfriend never got back with her. She was left feeling betrayed and abused.

Pereira, who was featured in the MTV anti-digital dating abuse campaign, "[A Thin Line](#)," in December, has been speaking out against the growing problem of digital dating abuse among teens. In the MTV documentary, Pereira's parents and friends also warned about the consequences of sexting photos like the one that caused Pereira such pain.

A [new study](#) released this week finds more youths are using their tech gadgets and social media to abuse each other in romantic relationships. One in 10 teens reported they received a threatening cell phone message from their romantic partner, according to new results from the [Cyberbullying Research Center](#), a research group dedicated to tracking bullying behaviors online among youth.

Abusive teens may also exert their control by preventing their partners from using technology, experts say. About 10 percent of teens interviewed say a romantic partner stopped them from using a computer or cell phone.

The study examined 4,400 responses from 11- to 18-year-old students in one school district in the southern U.S. The study's authors say this is one of the first attempts to quantify how often digital dating abuse is occurring among teens.

"It may be checking her text and pictures to make sure she's not texting with any other boys," explains Sameer Hinduja, co-founder of the Cyberbullying Research Center and associate professor of criminology at Florida Atlantic University. "He wants to make sure the pictures are appropriate. It's the coercion and control that borders on real-world violence."

And sometimes, the abuse involves the exchange of racy photos, a practice called sexting. In fact, this study showed that boys are more likely to be victims: about 5 percent of boys

and 3 percent of girls had a romantic partner upload or share a humiliating photograph online.

Kevin Jennings, assistant deputy secretary of education for the [Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools](#), says digital dating abuse is becoming a more frequent problem among teens. The 24/7 technology enables the abusive partner to stalk the other person after school and on weekends, he said.

Jennings said social networking, which can connect hundreds and thousands of students, gives the abusive partner more leverage. With access to so many friends online, the abuser can post a damaging message online about their significant other or make threats to do so.

"It's the phenomenon of no place to run and no place to hide," Jennings says. "Now, you can be stalked electronically. You can't even see your predator coming."

Jill Murray, a psychotherapist in California who has worked with victims of teen dating abuse, says almost all her new cases in the past three years involve technology. In some instances, the victims, usually teenage girls, receive as many as 40 texts a day with negative messages from their partner.

"She is required to keep her cell phone on all day, all night and be receptive," Murray explains.

The abuse online and through cell phones can sometimes turn into physical violence, she warned.

Since digital abuse does not leave physical marks on their children, parents may be clueless about the abuse. Kids are also afraid to report the abuse to their parents because they may believe the abuse is not that big a deal, or they fear losing cell phone and laptop privileges, experts say.

The humiliation can be lasting for a teenager, said Parry Aftab, founder of the internet bullying advocacy group, [Wired Safety](#). She has heard of cases where the abusive partner may take the partner's password to check up on him or her routinely.

Other times, the abuser may violate their partner's privacy by breaking into their e-mail or checking their phone. The abusive teens may also monitor their partners' behaviors on social media sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

To combat digital dating abuse, several organizations have launched campaigns to educate teenage girls and boys about the damaging consequences of digital dating abuse. The Family Violence Prevention Fund is working with the Department of Justice to release a series of public service announcements in their "[That's Not Cool](#)" campaign, which encourages teens to be more watchful of their digital relationship behavior.

Liz Claiborne Inc., a major women's clothing company, is addressing digital dating abuse. Teens can call in for help at the hot line and web site "[Love is Respect.](#)"

Allyson Pereira also continues raising awareness about digital dating abuse. She recently graduated from community college with a degree in elementary education. Therapy and time has helped her move past the digital abuse she endured.

One afternoon, she offered some advice on what teens should do if they are victims of digital dating violence.

"Tell somebody they trust and try to get help because you can't go through it yourself," she said. "It's too much of a burden to carry."

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