



Actors used in image as photographed by Body+Soul.

## “I’D WEAR MY JUMPER TO SCHOOL TO COVER THE BRUISES”

From partners stalking and documenting their girlfriends’ every move on Facebook and young girls hiding marks on their bodies given to them by their abusive boyfriends, to girls as young as 16 seeking refuge at women’s community shelters, domestic violence among young women is real. So ahead of International Women’s Day tomorrow, *Body+Soul* is talking about it

PHOTOGRAPHY DANIEL NADEL STORY DANNIELLE MILLER

### “IT’S VITAL WE TEACH GIRLS WHAT THE WARNING SIGNS FOR ABUSE ARE, HOW THEY CAN SET BOUNDARIES AND EXPLICITLY EXPLAIN HOW THEY CAN SAFELY LEAVE UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS”

frightened and hurt by the aggression they experienced.

Teen violence is rarely discussed and many people remain unaware of the gravity of the situation. The issue was first exposed to the education and parenting sector in a 2008 White Ribbon Foundation report on the impact of violence on young people. And while the document is now over 12 years old, shockingly, it is still one of the few reports on teen violence in Australia that exists.

“Females were more likely to slap, whereas males were more likely to put down or humiliate, try to control the victim physically and to throw, smash, hit or kick something,” the report says. “Girls and young women suffer more, they are more afraid and they experience much more sexual violence than boys and young men.”

These alarming statistics are probably only the tip of the iceberg. Given that reporting abuse is something even adults struggle with, experts believe adolescents may feel even less inclined to disclose what is happening to them.

In my work with teen girls who have been in abusive relationships, these young women tell me they remained silent as they feared they would get in trouble from their parents for dating in the first place. Others kept quiet knowing they would have to face the perpetrator every day at school, or because they feared they would be asked to change schools to avoid their ex-partner. Some dreaded being alienated by their peer group if they spoke up, while others didn’t yet have the language to even identify the behaviour as domestic violence.

Queensland school psychologist Jody Forbes agrees that young women can find calling out abusive behaviour particularly challenging. “Many have been conditioned by narratives like *Beauty And The Beast* to put their needs aside; they may see it as their role to fix or rescue their partner. It’s vital we teach girls what the warning signs for abuse are, how they can set boundaries and explicitly explain how they can safely leave unhealthy relationships.”

With all the work that’s been done in Australia on raising awareness about relationship abuse, why then are we not developing more targeted awareness

campaigns aimed at teens? Kate Munro, CEO of youth-advocacy body Youth Action (YA), believes it’s because the wider community wrongly assume that if a young person is impacted by domestic violence, it’s as a witness. “Adolescents experience domestic and family violence as primary victims/survivors, but are often recognised as merely extensions of their parents or caregivers,” she explains.

Munro reveals that in YA’s preliminary consultations with teens, 76 per cent of respondents said they hadn’t learnt about relationship abuse at school, while 41 per cent admitted that if they had concerns about their relationship being abusive, they wouldn’t know where to go to get help. “The gaps in education and barriers to accessing support need to be urgently addressed,” she says.

When love literally hurts, it can leave long-lasting emotional scars including anxiety, depression, substance use, antisocial behaviour, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts. In addition, the patterns of abuse may also become normalised and leave young women more vulnerable to further abuse in their adult lives.

Women’s Community Shelters CEO Annabelle Daniel notes it is extremely common for older women who seek refuge in shelters to have endured their first experience of abuse in their teens.

Daniel is also quick to point out that we shouldn’t assume that the abuse

#### SIGNS YOUR TEEN MAY BE IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

Spending all their time with their partner and no longer connecting with their usual social circle

Always checking their phone, and becoming distressed when asked to turn it off

Unexplained scratches or bruises

Becoming withdrawn, depressed or anxious

Suddenly refusing to go to school, or a drop in their grades

Their partner seeming jealous or controlling

teenagers are encountering is not at a severe level. She tells *Body+Soul* that Women’s Community Shelters regularly have young women seeking crisis accommodation in their shelters. “We have supported 16- and 17-year-olds, some with children, who have been coerced into serious relationships before they were ready, and then subjected to surveillance and had their daily movements controlled,” she reveals.

Because perpetrators of abuse often isolate their victims from friends and family, she continues, once the violence escalates, these young women are left distraught – and homeless.

Although schools prioritise bullying

programs, many in education and in the domestic-violence sector believe the relationship abuse teen girls experience is the public-health emergency we must stop ignoring.

“Throughout my career I’ve certainly seen girls as young as 14 and 15 being manipulated and controlled by their boyfriend,” says Paulina Skerman, the principal of Santa Sabina College, an all-girls school in Sydney. “With older girls, the abuse can become frightening – and criminal.”

She says it’s time for parents and teachers to heighten their awareness of the dating violence our girls are experiencing in order to better support them to firstly identify abuse, and then to protect themselves from it. “If we won’t challenge gender stereotypes, discuss power imbalances and shine a light on toxic relationships, then who will?”

Samantha agrees we must stop burying our heads in the sand. “The only one who should have felt ashamed of what was happening between us was him,” she says. “I hope sharing my story will help other teen girls going through what I went through to know they aren’t to blame, and that what is happening to them is not only wrong, but a path they shouldn’t have to walk alone.”

*Danielle Miller is a teen educator and the director of Education and Special Projects at Women’s Community Shelters. She is the co-author, with Nina Funnell, of Loveability: An Empowered Girl’s Guide To Dating And Relationships.*

\*Not her real name.

**If you or anyone you know is suffering violence, there is lots of help out there. Call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800, to get advice and support.**



#### “MY FIRST ROMANCE WAS TRAUMATISING” — BIANCA\*, 22 YEARS OLD

I met my first boyfriend on Facebook when I was 14. He went to another school, but we had mutual friends online. We didn’t meet up in person all that often, but we’d message each other all the time.

At first, I found the fact that he would text me all the time really flattering and I liked the attention. But then he started to become controlling – he’d ask who I had spoken to at school,

and if I was working on a group assignment with a boy, for example, he’d get furious. We’d then argue. He was always accusing me of cheating on him.

When we did see each other, he would be really touchy-feely. I was inexperienced and wasn’t even comfortable kissing, but he’d tell me he’d break up with me if I wouldn’t kiss him or let him hang all over me.

He convinced me I’d be nothing without him. After about six months, it escalated to the point that I had to tell him everything I was doing. If I did go somewhere without telling him, he’d threaten to send his mates to where I worked at my part-time job to bash me. It was terrifying.

It took about two years before I had the courage to tell my parents what

was really happening, and to cut off contact with him.

Adults joke about first romances like they are harmless, but mine was traumatising. I had no idea how controlling it was at the time as I had nothing to compare it to. I still find it very hard to trust people and I’m extremely guarded in my adult relationships because of what happened to me back then.

\*Not her real name.