

## **University students' problem-solving behaviors and exposure to dating abuse in their romantic relationship**

Ilknur AA.\*, Ozge O, Durdane Y, Dilek ÇE.

Ondokuz Mayıs University, Samsun School of Health, Turkey

### **ABSTRACT**

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**Purpose:** To examine problem solving behaviors and exposure to dating abuse of the students studying in the Nursing Department, in their romantic relationships.

**Materials and methods:** This research was conducted as descriptive study between 30.12.2013 and 10.03.2014 in a Health School. The research did not perform sampling and included 373 students who could be reached, agreed to participate in the research and had no error in their data collection forms. Data was collected using a 21-question introductory questionnaire developed by the researcher and "the Problem Solving on Romantic Relationships Scale for Adolescents" consisting of 38 questions. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, t test and correlation analysis.

**Results:** 72.5% of the participating students were female and 27.5% were male. It was determined that 43.3% of all the students had a girlfriend

/boyfriend, 51% had no romantic relationship before, and 59.5% experienced problems in their relationship. The students whose longest place of residence was in a village were found to be more exposed to emotional and physical abuse ( $t=4.99$ ,  $t=4.55$ , and  $p<0.05$ , respectively). The students who had problems in their romantic relationship were found to be more exposed to emotional abuse and to be more engaged in problem solving. The students who were exposed to abuse in their romantic relationship were more exposed to emotional and physical abuse and also more engaged in problem solving ( $p<0.05$ ).

**Conclusions:** Abuse is a concept which is still difficult to be expressed. It is important that individuals exposed to abuse are aware of and express this situation.

**Key words:** Students, behaviours, abuse, romantic relationship.

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**\*Corresponding author:**

Ilknur Aydın Avci

Ondokuz Mayıs University, Samsun School of Health Samsun , Turkey

Tel.: +905052031286,

e-mail: ilknura@omu.edu.tr

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## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the World Health Organization, abuse is a threat or an act against other persons or the community by consciously using physical force which is likely to result in injury, death, psychological harm, development disorder, or deprivation [1]. Abuse is the most common but the least defined abuse of human rights in the world [2]. Abuse is multilateral, multi-dimensional and has multiple types. As one of the types of abuse, "physical abuse" is the use of brute force as means of intimidation, suppression and enforcement. Physical abuse involves situations physical force is used such as pushing, slapping, biting, trying to suffocate, kicking, punching, throwing objects, threatening with tools such as a knife or gun, and torturing [3,4]. "Emotional abuse" is consistent exploitation of emotions and emotional needs and their use as a means of enforcement and threat to oppress other party for the purpose of forcing, humiliating, punishing and relieving anger or tension. Emotional abuse is the disregard and contempt of emotions and emotional needs such as love, affection, attention, approval and support; it can also involve verbal attacks, oppression, control, isolation, teasing and hinting for the purpose of insulting [4,5]. "Sexual abuse" involves such behaviors as uttering sexually explicit words, molestation, squeezing, and groping [4]. Sexual abuse is seen all over the world. Despite the small number of research on this issue in many countries, available information indicates that about One out of four women in some countries have experienced sexual abuse by an intimate partner [6]. The last type of abuse, "economic abuse" includes acts such as the denial of funds, refusal to contribute financially, denial of food and basic needs, and controlling access to health care [7].

The first thing coming to mind when think of abuse were physical abuse before; however, different types of abuse are now emerging in all areas of life. The most common type of abuse experienced by women globally is intimate partner abuse and sometimes can result in death [8]. In addition to dating abuse and partner abuse, such notions as intimate partner abuse, intimate partner violence, spouse abuse/violence and domestic violence are also used in studies conducted [9].

Dating is defined as the relationship two individuals maintain by engaging in social interactions and meetings implicitly or explicitly together until either party wants to terminate or until they marry [10]. Powers et al. highlights that dating abuse once interpreted as physical pressure now can lead to acts with much worse harm such as sexual assault and even murder. Dating abuse includes forced and manipulative acts performed by one of the parties in order to seize control by force over the other party [11].

Considering all cases in dating abuse, exposure to abuse in previous relationships involves major physical violent acts such as wall slapping, kicking and trying to suffocate as well as major emotional violent acts such as intimidating with a knife or gun. Considering separately women and men, common violent behaviors in previous relationships are similarly major abuse acts. In their current relationships, women are most frequently exposed to acts such as intimidating with a knife or gun, grabbing money, prevention of receiving health care, wall slapping, and trying to suffocate. For men, kicking, wall slapping, burning a part of body with hot objects or liquids, intimidating with a knife or gun, and trying to suffocate are most frequently exposed acts in their current relationships; and kicking, burning a part of body with hot objects or liquids, wall slapping, intimidating with a knife or gun, and trying to suffocate are most frequently exposed acts in their previous relationships. The most common use of force by men is preventing family planning and forcing sexual intercourse; and the most common use of force by women is touching despite the unwillingness of her partner and forcing sexual intercourse [12].

According to the study conducted in Denmark by Plauborg et al. [13] young women are more frequently exposed to dating abuse than men. In the past year, 3.7% of men and 6.5% of women were exposed to physical, psychological or emotional by their current or previous partner. In the past year, young women exposed to physical dating abuse two times more than men (3.2% and 1.7%, respectively). According to estimates, 10.000 women and 5.500 men aged 16 to 24 in Denmark are exposed to physical dating abuse per year. It has been reported that 2.5% young women compared to 1.5% young men were exposed to threat of abuse, harassment or other types of psychological abuse in the last year. The frequency of exposure to sexual attack was documented to be two times higher in young women than men (2.7% compared to 1.2%) [13].

According to the study conducted in 2007 by Chiung and Shen [8], Taiwanese university students with a previous experience of dating used some types of dating abuse (58.2% for women, 59.9% for men). When categorizing abuse, the rates were psychological (55.5), physical (18.6), and sexual (7.6), respectively.

In their study, Lysova and Douglas [14] reported that 25.5% of Russian university students were exposed to one or more physical attack and 3.6% to physical injury by their partner in the last one year. There was a statistically significant difference between the sex ratio of the students physically assaulted (35.6% women, 20.6% men). In Russia, the injury rate of female students by their partners is higher than that of men (5.3% women,

1.5% men). Almost 1.4 (24.1%) of the sample stated that their partner used various forcing for sex in the last one year. Women were two times more exposed to abuse than men (32.8% women, 15.4% men). Psychological aggression was identified as the most common misbehavior in this study conducted among Russian students. More than half of the students stated they were exposed to psychological attack (61.6%). Although women were more frequently exposed to psychological aggression than men, this difference was not statistically significant (66.7% women, 56.5 men) [14].

Studies on dating abuse and intimate partner abuse in Turkey indicates that dating abuse among teens is on the rise. Yigitalp et al. (2001) reported that 6.2% of female students and 7.9% of male students were exposed to physical abuse within the last fifteen days. The rate of the exposure to emotional abuse was found to be 23.7% for the female senior students and 20.5% for the males. Although one of the male students was exposed to sexual abuse within the last fifteen days, 1.2% of the female students reported rape [15].

In the study conducted in 2010 by Hatipoglu, the rate of the boys who were exposed to abuse in their previous relationship was 140/148 (94.6%) and the rate of those who used abuse was 139/148 (93.9%). The rate of the girls who were exposed to abuse in their previous relationship was 205/218 (94.0%) and the rate of those who used abuse was 205/218 (94.0%). The rate of the girls who were exposed to abuse and used abuse in their current relationship was 130/130 (100%). The rate of the boys who were exposed to abuse and used abuse in their current relationship was 91/92 (98.9%) [12].

In the study of Kabasakal and Girli (2012), the rate of "dating jealousy" was 79.5% in women and 52.6% in men. The rate of "frequently yelling at the partner" was 13.6% in women and 3.8% in men. The rate of "being insulted by the partner" (often and occasionally) was 10.3% in women and 22.7% in men [16].

Adolescents represent the largest risk group in terms of abuse. Adolescence is a period teens form their identity and it also shows the physical and cognitive changes. In this complex period of such changes, teens begin to have emotional relationship and may reflect this complexity in their relationship. As a result, there may be abuse in dating relationships. Adolescents constitute a considerable part of university students. University life is period many teens longingly expect and desire in their dreams. Fresh university students engage in an environment which is new, different and possibly unfamiliar to them. In a freedom and autonomy environment different than high school, vocational courses, friendships of different kinds and relations with lecturers are among the new experiences of university life.

Human relations are very important in the nursing profession. Nursing students who will be practitioners of this profession are expected to have high emotion and anger control. Thus, problem-solving approaches of nursing students in romantic relationships can give clues to their problem-solving approaches of nursing students in human relationships when they become professional nurses. Proceeding from this view, the present study was conducted to examine problem solving behaviors and exposure to dating abuse of the students studying in the Nursing Department in a Health School, in their romantic relationships.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research was conducted between 30.12.2013 and 10.03.2014 in a Health School. This is a descriptive study.

### *Research Population and Sample*

The research population consists of 435 students studying in Nursing Department, a Health School. The research did not perform sampling and included all the students who could be reached, agreed to participate in the research and had no error in their data collection forms. A total 373 students were reached. 20 of them had errors in their data collection forms and thus were not included in the study, and 62 students did not want to participate in the research (87.5% of the population).

### *Data Collection Tools*

Data was collected using a 21-question introductory questionnaire developed by the researcher and "the Problem Solving on Romantic Relationships Scale for Adolescents" consisting of 38 questions.

*Problem Solving on Romantic Relationships Scale for Adolescents (PSRRS-A):* In this 5-point Likert type scale consisting of 38 items developed in 2010 by Kalkan to determine problem solving behavior in romantic relationships of adolescents, respondents are expected to rate their opinions as (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Occasionally, (4) Very often, (5) Always. The scale has three subscales as Physical Abuse, Emotional Abuse and Problem Solving. Construct validity was used testing the validity of PSRRS-A. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was found 0.91 for the entire scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were as follows:  $\alpha=0.86$  for 'emotional abuse' subscale,  $\alpha=0.80$  for 'physical abuse' subscale, and  $\alpha=0.76$  for 'problem solving' subscale [17].

Physical abuse subscale examines individuals' behaviors to physically harm their partner or to damage the physical integrity in romantic relationship. Emotional abuse subscale reveals to

what extent individuals behave their partner in a way such as rejecting, insulting, swearing, leaving alone, intimidating, frustrating, threatening, not meeting emotional needs, ignoring, humiliating, sarcastically speaking, nicknaming. Problem solving subscale deals with individuals' behaviors to try understanding each other in the face of a problem, to express their feelings, to handle each other's needs, feelings and thoughts in romantic relationship.

#### *Data Collection*

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews. It took about 10 minutes to administer the data collection form.

#### *Ethical Compliance*

The research was carried out by obtaining the written permission of the School Administration and verbal consent of the students.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data obtained in the research was analyzed by SPSS 21.0 program. The data was evaluated using descriptive statistics, t test and correlation analysis.

## **RESULTS**

The mean age of the students participating in the study was  $20.25 \pm 1.79$ . 72.5% of the students were female and 27.5% were male. Participants (33.1%) were first-grade students, 30.6% second-grade students, 13.9% third-grade students, and 22.4% fourth-grade students. When considering the longest place of residence, 10.8% of the students lived in a village, 38.5% in a district, and 50.7% in a province. 82.2% were nuclear family members, 16.4% extended family members, and 1.4% broken family members. 2.3% had no sibling, 72% had one to three siblings, and 25.8% had more than four siblings. Evaluating the maternal education status, it was found that 4.5% were illiterate, 9.1% were literate, 49.3% were primary school graduate, 11.9% were secondary school graduate, 19% were high school graduate, and 6.2% were university graduate. Evaluating the paternal education status, it was found that 0.6 were illiterate, 5.9% were literate, 32% were primary school graduate, 12.2% were secondary school graduate, 29.5% were high school graduate, and 19.8% were university graduate. With respect to the family economic status, 3.1 % had low economic status, 76.2% had moderate economic status, and 20.7% had high economic status. 5.7% of the participating students work while 9.3% do not work. Considering the

place of accommodation, 11% of the students stay in a private dormitory, 31.7% stay in a public dormitory, and 26.1% stay in a student house, and 31.2% stays with family-relative.

Table 1 shows the students' experience of romantic relationship and problem solving. 43.3% of the students had a girlfriend/boyfriend, 51% had no romantic relationship before, and 59.5% had problems in their relationship. Considering the most common problems the students faced, 50.5% had problems because they talked raising their voice to their partner. It was found that 66.2% solved their problems by talking.

Table 2 shows the students' exposure to abuse and the reasons and types of abuse. 33.7% of all the participating students reported that they were exposed to abuse in their romantic relationship.

74.8% were exposed to abuse because of jealousy and 89.9% were exposed to emotional abuse.

Examining the relation between the defining characteristics of the students and the subscales of emotional abuse, physical abuse and problem solving, a relation was found between age and problem solving. Problem solving increased with age, and the difference was statistically significant ( $r = -0.049, p < 0.05$ ).

There was no relation between age and the emotional and physical abuse subscales ( $p > 0.05$ ).

There was a relation between gender and the problem solving subscale.

The female students were more engaged in problem solving than the male students, and the difference was statistically significant ( $t = 2.01, p < 0.05$ ).

No relation was found between gender and the emotional and physical abuse subscales ( $p > 0.05$ ).

A relation was found between the place of residence and the emotional and physical abuse subscales. The students whose longest place of residence was in a village were found to be more exposed to emotional and physical abuse, and the difference was statistically significant ( $t = 4.99, t = 4.55, \text{ and } p < 0.05, \text{ respectively}$ ). No relation was found between the place of residence and the problem solving subscale ( $p > 0.05$ ).

There was a relation between the place of accommodation and the problem solving subscale. The students staying in a private dormitory were found to be more engaged in problem solving, and the difference was statistically significant ( $t = 3.001, p < 0.05$ ).

No relation was found between the place of accommodation and the emotional and physical abuse subscales ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table 1.** Students' experience of romantic relationship and problem solving.

	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Relationship status</b>		
Yes	153	43.3
No	200	56.7
<b>Duration of relationship</b>		
<b>Previous relationship status</b>		
Yes	173	49
No	180	51
Duration		
<b>Status of having problem</b>		
Yes	210	59.5
No	143	40.5
<b>The most common problem (n=210)</b>		
Jealousy	106	50.5
Speaking by raising voice	17	8.1
Limit the social life	18	8.6
Insult	5	2.4
Force to do unwanted things	15	7.1
Financial issues	5	2.4
Jealousy , speak of raising voice, limit the social life	38	18.1
Misunderstanding, indifference, lie	6	2.9
<b>Status of solving problem (n=219)</b>		
Fight	29	13.2
Talk	145	66.2
Not meet for a while	32	14.6
Break up	13	5.9

**Table 2.** Students' exposure to abuse and the reasons and types of abuse.

	Number (n)	Percent (%)
<b>Status of exposure to violence</b>		
Yes	119	33.7
No	234	66.3
<b>The Cause of exposure to violence (n=119)</b>		
Jealousy	89	74.8
Financial issues	4	3.4
Accuse	15	12.6
Insult	7	5.9
to be touched without your consent	4	3.4
<b>Type of violence (n=119)</b>		
Physical violence	7	5.9
Emotional violence	107	89.9
Sexual violence	3	2.5
Financial violence	2	1.7

**Table 3.** Relations between student’s problem solving skills in romantic relationships and characteristics related to abuse.

Sub dimensions	Emotional abuse				Physical abuse				Solving problem			
	X	SD	statistic	p	X	SD	statistic	p	x	SD	statistic	p
<b>Status of Romantic relationship currently</b>												
Yes	23.7	6.72	-0.157	0.875	16.3	5.5	-0.157	0.875	40.8	8.6	<b>7.124</b>	<b>0.000</b>
No	23.9	8.23			16.4	6.2			32.8	12.4		
<b>Duration of relationship</b>	<b>r=-0.166</b>		<b>0.041</b>		r=-0.070		0.388		r=0.080		0.327	
<b>Status of romantic relationship previously</b>												
Yes	25.9	8.17	<b>5.126</b>	<b>0.000</b>	17.3	6.3	<b>2.928</b>	<b>0.004</b>	37.7	9.7	<b>2.400</b>	<b>0.017</b>
No	21.9	6.45			15.5	5.3			34.8	13		
<b>Duration of relationship</b>	r=-0.045		0.552		r=0.039		0.599		<b>r=0.189</b>		<b>0.011</b>	
<b>Status of having problem in romantic relationships</b>												
Yes	25.5	7.6	<b>4.999</b>	<b>0.000</b>	16.7	5.8	1.476	0.141	37.9	10.16	<b>3.013</b>	<b>0.003</b>
No	21.5	7			15.8	6.0			34.0	13.1		
<b>Status of exposure to violence in romantic relationships</b>												
Yes	25.43	7.9	<b>2.832</b>	<b>0.005</b>	17.4	6.5	<b>2.436</b>	<b>0.015</b>	37.9	10.25	<b>2.061</b>	<b>0.040</b>
No	23.02	7.3			15.8	5.5			35.4	12.14		

The students who had a current romantic relationship obtained higher scores from the problem solving subscale of the Problem Solving on Romantic Relationships Scale for Adolescents (PSRRS-A), and the difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 3).

There was a significant relation between the duration of the relationship of the students, who reported an experience of romantic relationship, and the emotional abuse subscale. The students with a short duration of relationship were found to be more exposed to emotional abuse. The difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

A significant relation was found between the previous experience of romantic relationship and the subscales of emotional abuse, physical abuse and problem solving. The students with a previous experience of romantic relationship obtained higher scores from each of the subscales, and the difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

There was a significant relation between the duration of the relationship of the students, who reported an experience of romantic relationship, and the problem solving subscale. The students with a long duration of romantic relationship were more engaged in problem solving, and the difference was statistically significant ( $r = 0.189$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

There was a significant relation between the participating students’ experience of having problems and the emotional abuse and problem solving subscales. The students who had problems in their romantic relationship were found to be more exposed to emotional abuse and to be more

engaged in problem solving, and the difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). No statistically significant difference was found between the students’ experience of having problems and the physical abuse subscale ( $p > 0.05$ ).

A significant relationship was found between the students’ experience of exposure to abuse in romantic relationships and the subscales of emotional abuse, physical abuse and problem solving. The students exposed to abuse in their romantic relationship were found to be more exposed to emotional and physical abuse and also to be more engaged in problem solving, and the difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

This research was conducted to examine the problem solving behaviors of the nursing students in romantic relationships and the frequency of exposure to dating abuse.

In this study, 33.7% of the participating students reported exposure to abuse. Dating abuse, which has long been ignored within the scope of abuse, has recently begun to attract attention. Literature studies on dating abuse do not date too far in time [3,8,19]. Chiung [8] reported that 59% of the university students were exposed to abuse. In other studies, the rate of exposure to dating abuse was 94.6% in Iran, 80.7% in Japan, 75% in India, 70% in Russia, and 62.7% in Germany [19]. Sakarya [2] found that 18.3% of the students were exposed to abuse. Aslan [18] found the rate of those

who were exposed to dating abuse to be 28.6%. Studies conducted in our country show parallelism with the present study while studies conducted in different other countries found the rate of dating abuse to higher. Literature review indicates students in our country are less exposed to dating abuse than those in foreign countries.

Students (49%) had a previous dating relationship and 43.3% had a current dating relationship. The findings of the present study show parallelism with those of Aslan et al. (2008). The students whose longest place of residence was in a village had a higher level of exposure to physical and emotional abuse. Hatipoglu (2010) found that those who grew up in city centers were less exposed to violence than those grow up in rural areas. In Spencer's study (2000) with similar results, the rate of exposure to abuse was 16% in students living in rural areas, 9 in suburban areas, and 8 in cities (20). The reason individuals growing up and living in rural areas are more exposed to abuse may be that they do not want others learn their exposure to abuse.

The scores which the students with a previous experience of romantic relationship obtained from the three subscales were higher than the scores of those who had no relationship before (Table 3,  $p < 0.05$ ). It is an expected result that the participating students with a previous experience of romantic relationship were more exposed to emotional and physical abuse. Problem solving and solution searching also represent other factors accompanying.

The present study found that the students staying in a private dormitory were more engaged in problem solving. The students' staying in a private dormitory indicates that these students have better their financial status and thus higher socio-economic levels, and that coping skills can increase with self-confidence.

The majority of the students (66.2%) stated that they could solve a problem if they had one in their relationship (Table 1). It can be thought that these students want to show professional problem solving approaches and it can be effective in the prevention of potential abuse.

Half of the students participating in the study (50.5%) reported that the most common problem they faced was jealousy (Table 1). The study of Aslan et al. (2008) had similar results. In the present study, 76.2% of the students had jealousy in their previous relationship and 71.4% in their current relationship. The higher level of jealousy may indicate that adolescents try to keep their partner under control because of low self-confidence. As jealousy is perceived as relationship commitment by adolescents, they can attribute different meanings to jealousy.

## **Suggestion**

The present study concluded that:

- More than half of the students had problems in their romantic relationship; the most common problem was jealousy, and they most often prefer speaking as a means of problem solving.
- One-third of the participating students were exposed to abuse; the students exposed to abuse were exposed mostly because of jealousy; and the majority students exposed to abuse were exposed to emotional abuse.
- The students exposed to emotional abuse, which is one of the subscales of PSRRS-A, had a long duration of current romantic relationship, had a previous romantic relationship, faced relationship problems and were exposed to abuse in their romantic relationship.
- The students exposed to physical abuse had a previous romantic relationship and were exposed to abuse in their romantic relationship.
- The participating students with a current romantic relationship, those with a previous romantic relationship, those with a long duration of previous romantic relationship, those facing problems in their romantic relationship, and those exposed to abuse in their romantic relationship were found to be engaged in problem solving.

In accordance with these results;

Abuse is a concept which is still difficult to be expressed. It is important that individuals exposed to abuse are aware of and express this situation. Thus, it is suggested to carry out trainings to increase the awareness of abuse especially in intimate partner relationships of university students.

It is helpful to conduct similar studies in different societies and with different student groups.

## **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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