

Published December 21st, 2011

## Family Focus Abusive Teen Relationships

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Graham and how it affected her. She felt off-balance and unable to be her former confident, fun-loving self. Maya realized she was taking out her unhappiness on her family, the only ones who loved her unconditionally.

Over time, Maya was able to reflect on her relationship with Graham more rationally and less emotionally. Maya needed to consider what qualities she liked and admired in herself and how to maintain them. She also needed to think about ways that she wanted to improve herself. Then she could look at her relationship with Graham to see how it worked for her. Obviously there were benefits, but were they worth the sacrifices to her self-esteem? And did she recognize the ways that Graham undermined her self-confidence? Could she see the discrepancies between how she wanted to be treated by a boyfriend and how she really was being treated? One question I like to ask is, "If your best friend complained to you about her boyfriend exhibiting these same words and actions, what would you want for her and how would you advise her?"

An emotionally abusive relationship contains insults, betrayals, inconsistencies, manipulation, attempts to control, disrespect and disregard. It causes a person to doubt oneself frequently, be fearful of another's reaction, ignore one's own needs in a constant effort to please another person, and to feel disparaged and degraded.

A physically abusive relationship usually contains all of the above in addition to unwanted physical contact. This contact may involve shoving or grabbing and isn't necessarily physically painful, but it still crosses a personal barrier of being touched without permission. And when we say "no" or "stop" and are ignored, the other person is violating our basic freedom to control our own bodies.

If you see your child exhibiting signs of emotional or physical abuse, it is important to mention your concerns immediately. Give examples of symptoms and how you see your child's demeanor changing. Ask if she or he wants to talk to you or anyone else about it.

Typically, a victim of abuse is both embarrassed and in denial. It may take your insisting on some family therapy sessions, as Maya's mother did, to get your child the necessary help. Occasionally, families need to plan an intervention with family members and close friends of the victim to confront her with their concerns, observations, and strong requests that she obtain help. The good news is that after a teen is able to recognize and get treatment for an abusive relationship, he or she will usually come out much stronger and better equipped to evaluate future

Maya was sixteen and in love for the first time. Her boyfriend, Graham, was a senior with a funny, charming personality. They agreed to be together exclusively and Maya became sexually active for the first time with Graham. The only problem was that as time went on, Graham began to belittle Maya. He would tell her that one of her best friends was really hot or that Maya could lose a few pounds. At times he would take a long time to text her back or would show up late if they had plans. Since Graham was popular and well-liked, Maya took everything he said to heart and made allowances for his behavior. She had never had a boyfriend before and thought that maybe she was being too demanding at times.

During Spring break Maya took a trip with her family. One of her friends told her that she saw Graham at a party being affectionate with another girl. When Maya confronted Graham, he denied being more than friends with the other girl. Soon afterwards, Maya heard through the grapevine that Graham had been sexually intimate with yet another girl. Although she was broken-hearted, Maya was determined to make their relationship work. She was so consumed with Graham that she couldn't imagine not being with him.

Graham continued to disparage Maya by calling her controlling, insecure, and jealous, and often found fault with her. But at times he reverted back to his charming self, and then all was well.

I first got involved when Maya's mother contacted me. She was worried that Maya was unhappy much of the time and was yelling and argumentative at home. Maya wouldn't come in for therapy by herself, but she was willing to come in with her mother to work on their relationship.

After several family sessions Maya agreed to see me alone. She disclosed the nature of her relationship with

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