



Friends Helping Friends: A nonrandomized control trial of a peer-based response to dating violence

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ABSTRACT

Dating violence is a significant problem for older adolescents with implications for the survivor's health. Survivors disclose the violence to friends who are often ill equipped to help them manage the consequences. The purpose of this pilot study was to evaluate the effectiveness and feasibility of Friends Helping Friends, a community-level education program to teach older adolescents to recognize and intervene in dating violence. A convenience sample of 101 students aged 18 to 22 years were nonrandomly allocated to a treatment or control group and completed pre- and post-test measures. Compared with the control group, treatment group participants reported increased perceived responsibility to help, skills to act as a bystander, and intention to help and decreased rape myth acceptance. Friends Helping Friends shows promise as an effective strategy for older adolescent females in the prevention and response to dating violence.

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Introduction

Dating violence affects as many as 30% of college women. Dating violence, which includes sexual, physical, emotional, and stalking abuse, is a public health concern that disproportionately affects older adolescent females on college campuses (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Rennison, 2003). The impact of dating violence on mental and physical health and life routines and activities is well documented (Amar & Gennaro, 2005; Banyard & Cross, 2008; Munoz-Rivas,

Grana, O'Leary, & Gonzalez, 2007). The associated health social, emotional, and academic consequences make it important to prevent violence and to respond appropriately to survivors.

Several factors complicate the response to and prevention of dating violence, sometimes called intimate partner violence. Typically, the perpetrator is someone the survivor knows, usually a current or former partner or acquaintance (Black et al., 2011; Fisher, Cullen, & Daigle, 2005; Fisher et al., 2000). Many young women who experience dating violence do not seek help from formal sources, and the friends in whom they confide

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do not recommend formal sources of help (O'Campo, Shelley, & Jaycox, 2007). Often, peers witness dating violence in social situations and see the effects of violence in their friends, but, frequently, they also know the perpetrator. Alternately, they are aware of violence because the survivor discloses to them (Banyard, Moynihan, Walsh, Cohn, & Ward, 2010). However, peers are commonly ill equipped to deal with dating violence, report distress from helping a peer with violence, and may hold victim blaming beliefs (Amar, Bess, & Stockbridge, 2010; Banyard et al., 2010; Garcia, Lechner, Frerich, Lust, & Eisenberg, 2012; McMahan, 2011; Talbot, Neill, & Rankin, 2010). Furthermore, despite most college students feeling that they were helpful to someone who disclosed sexual violence, a significant portion also feel discomfort with the disclosure (Banyard et al., 2010).

Many campuses provide dating violence prevention and education programs, most of which focus primarily on sexual assault, but there is little evidence of their efficacy. In addition, few programs include or target dating violence in older adolescence. Many of these programs focus on potential victims and teach ways to avoid victimization. This approach is problematic because it can promote victim-blaming attitudes among survivors, perpetrators, friends, and peers. Focusing on potential victims also places the onus on the survivor with little emphasis on the perpetrator of the behavior or the friends who witness and are told about the violence. This program addresses the latter, preparing friends and peers to help friends to respond to victimization.

Despite the importance of dating violence and an understanding of the peer dynamics, few prevention programs address peer roles, and we are not aware of programs that target community responses to dating violence. Providing education to peers on how to help a friend could increase reporting to formal sources, which would provide the necessary support and resources that could mitigate health, academic, and social consequences of dating violence.

A promising approach to sexual assault prevention is bystander education (Amar, Sutherland & Kesler, 2012; Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Coker et al., 2011; Langford, 2004). Bystanders are any individuals who witness emergencies, crises, or situations that could lead to emergencies or crises. By their presence, bystanders have the opportunity to help, do nothing, or even contribute to the negative behavior (Banyard et al., 2007; Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004). Program attendees are seen as potential bystanders who can intervene to prevent sexual violence and respond appropriately to survivors in the aftermath, rather than potential victims and perpetrators. This approach decreases the anxiety and resistance, creates new community norms, and increases responsibility for intervening (Banyard et al., 2004).

Peer-based education strategies can be beneficial in changing individual perceptions and campus norms related to violence. Bystander education has proven

successful in sexual assault prevention and intervention; however, we are not aware of research testing bystander education on dating violence. Participation in bystander education programs results in decreased rape myths and increased knowledge, self-efficacy related to bystander behavior, increased likelihood of engaging in bystander behaviors, and increased bystander behaviors (Amar et al., 2012; Banyard et al., 2007; Coker et al., 2011; Langford, 2004).

The theoretical foundation for the bystander education program comes from the five-step model proposed by Latane and Darley (1970). Burns (2009) extended the model to include barriers to bystander behavior regarding sexual assault at each stage. This research project sought to extend the model further to include dating violence. The first step is that before bystanders can act to prevent or intervene in dating violence, they must notice the event; a barrier to acting as a bystander is the failure to notice (Latane & Darley, 1970). The second step is for participants to identify the situation as requiring assistance. A common barrier to bystander behavior is the failure to identify a situation as high risk or an emergency (Burn, 2009; Latane & Darley, 1970). Denial or lack of awareness of dating violence as a problem on campus can be a barrier to identifying the situation as one in which one could intervene. The third step is to decide to take responsibility for acting. The related barrier is the failure to feel a sense of responsibility to intervene (Banyard, 2008). The fourth step is to decide how to help. The correlating barrier is a failure to act because of a lack of skills (Burn, 2009; Latane & Darley, 1970). The fifth and final step is for participants to act by intervening to prevent dating violence or to respond appropriately to survivors. The corresponding barrier is a failure to intervene because of audience inhibition, fears of embarrassment, safety, awkwardness, and social concerns regarding relationships with peers. Discussion centers on weighing the pros and cons of acting and making a good and safe decision.

Bystander education is a promising strategy to prevent sexual violence and improve the responses of peers to victims by changing attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. The social nature of dating violence makes it amenable to community or peer-based strategies of prevention and response. This pilot study uses a peer-based approach to extend bystander principles to dating violence. Friends Helping Friends is a peer-based education program focused on dating violence. The program teaches peers to recognize signs that dating violence could be occurring and to intervene to prevent dating violence and to respond appropriately to victims. The purpose of this nonrandomized control trial is to evaluate Friends Helping Friends, an educational program that trains older adolescent females to identify and respond to survivors and situations of dating violence. The specific aims are to (a) determine the efficacy of Friends Helping Friends, a bystander education based program to improve peer response to dating violence, and (b) determine the feasibility of the program.

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