CONNECTED THROUGH (ONLINE) CONNECTION
Challenges and risks of romantic relationships of young people for time of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Adolescence is an important period of life in which young people, among other things, enter into the first romantic relationships, ie "dating", "stealing", "walking", etc. By entering into quality romantic relationships with peers, young people meet one of the basic human needs, and that is the need for belonging and love. At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures of the competent institutions, the possibilities for young people to enter into romantic relationships are limited to digital devices and their own homes, and the question arises, how safe is that?

The romantic relationships of young people have been put to a great test with regard to measures of physical distancing. However, modern technologies allow young people to stay in daily contact, even if they are not in the same location. Adolescents stay in touch with their peers through social networks, facetime and various applications, but also find potential romantic partners. However, a number of organizations warn of the risk of online violence in youth relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic due to increased Internet use among young people, and the lack of professionals due to school closures creates additional concern.
Connections can unfortunately become violent, and online connections manipulative or overly controlling. Violence in youth relationships refers to all forms of violent behavior that are committed for the purpose of controlling, powering, and intimidating partners. Violence in youth relationships (TDA - teen dating violence) is divided into emotional (psychological) which is also the most common (Taylor et al., 2016; Niolon et al., 2015), then physical, economic, sexual violence or stalking, but also threats to all of the above (Largio, 2007, p. 4; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Specific forms of emotional violence include jealousy, isolation of partners from friends and family, persistent surveillance, and intimidation. Given that young people often perceive jealousy as a sign of infatuation and love, it can be a risk factor for remaining in a violent relationship. Violence in youth relationships is often explained in the literature by the “circle of violence” hypothesis, which has its three phases (Carlson, 2003; Mauer and Reppucci, 2019).

In phase (1) of "tension", the violent partner continuously verbally abuses the victim, while the victim tries to control the situation by satisfying the violent partner or trying to avoid him, but sooner or later there is (2) an "explosion" which is the peak of tension in that period. physical abuse occurs most often. After physical abuse, the partner who committed the violence may feel ashamed of his or her behavior, trying to reduce the harmfulness of the violence committed. This phase is called (3) the "honeymoon", and the partner who committed the violence begins to express regret for his behavior in various ways or approaches the partner with generous and well-meaning gestures and convinces him that the violent behavior will not happen again. The victim will experience such manipulative behavior as an expression of love and forgive his partner again, that is, he will not leave the violent relationship. After some time, the phase of the "honeymoon" will end, and everyday tensions will begin to accumulate, which will lead to verbal violence and the repetition of this "vicious circle" of violence in youth relationships.

A 2015 survey found that 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 10 boys have been victims of partner violence in the past 12 months (Vagi, Olsen, Basile, & Vivolo-Kantor, 2015). Some research shows that violence in adolescent relationships is more widespread than violence in marital communities, so data were obtained that 44% of young people experience physical violence in relationships (Krahé and Berger, 2005), and 77% of them emotional violence (Tschann et al., 2009).

Of additional concern is the fact that relationship violence after the first incident becomes more frequent and intense, and the abused person loses control of his life and becomes increasingly dependent on his partner and at the same time isolated from other close people (Vagi, Olsen, Basile and Vivolo-Kantor, 2015).
In recent times, violence in youth relationships is also gaining its electronic perspective, as almost all adolescents have access to the Internet in their homes and on their mobile phones. Also, the measures of the competent institutions have closed the doors of educational institutions, and young people are therefore spending more and more time in front of screens - on social networks, applications and games. **Electronic abuse** is present in youth relationships in the form of harassment, threats, imitation, humiliation or verbal violence through digital devices, ie social networks and other social media (Temple et al., 2016).

Half of the adolescents surveyed who participated in one foreign study state that they have experienced some form of relationship violence through electronic devices at least once in their lives (Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, & Calvete, 2015). A study by the Zagreb Child and Youth Protection Center on a sample of Croatian adolescents revealed that 58.6% of young people stated that they had received some form of sexual content on their electronic device at least once in their lives. These data become even more significant considering that the likelihood of experiencing relationship violence among young people was 2 to 8 times higher for boys and 2 to 4 times higher for girls who exchanged sexually explicit material with their partners (Költő et al., 2018).
During physical distancing, the question arises as to how and in what way young people will maintain their relationships during a health crisis. Worrying data show that 78% of young people experience their partner checking on them several times during the day (about what they do, who they correspond with, and some ask for evidence) (Hancock, Keast and Ellis, 2017), and during self-isolation measures, physical distancing and quarantine - these figures are potentially even higher. The main reason for checking partners is mostly jealousy, with partners often interfering in the daily activities of partners (Borrajo et al., 2015):

- checking e-mail addresses,
- reading or preferring to send them lists of messages and
- monitoring accounts on social networks

All of the above can be one of the predictors for other forms of violent behavior in relationships in young people (Muise, Christofides and Desmarais, 2009).

Signs of relationship violence are sometimes very difficult to recognize because they can be more subtle.

Some of the possible reasons for staying in a violent relationship are the desire to help the partner change their behavior, the idea that they can’t live without a partner, the shame of not finding out about the violence in the relationship, blaming themselves and believing the violence is deserved.
Reasons can also be fear for one's own safety and insufficient social support, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. Sometimes it seems that the relationship is not really bad, that the violence will not happen again or that it will stop after marriage or the birth of a child.

Practical guidelines for maintaining a romantic relationship during a COVID-19 pandemic:
1. Organize the time of day that you will reserve exclusively for communication with your partner.
2. Do not insist on all-day continuous contact, but make good use of the time together.
3. Be creative and find different ways to spend time together online (games, apps, video calls).

What you can do if you suspect your friend has been abused:

- Do not put pressure on the person to end the relationship - rejection
- Be supportive; say you’re there for him/her: “You don’t deserve pain and you’re not guilty”
- Respecting the other person’s feelings (not dissuading)
- Do not ask unnecessary questions
- Help seek information and help, tell an adult
- Do not criticize, take responsibility and do not confront your friend’s/child’s partner
Steps in achieving a quality partnership:

- Treat your partner the way you would want him to treat you
- Have self-esteem and don’t let yourself be a “doormat”
- Take responsibility for your own feelings
- Give space to your partner and yourself
- Honest communication and use of humor
- Remember to value yourself as much as your partner

Who to talk to?

Zagreb Child and Youth Protection Center offers a number of brochures in Croatian language on its website:

- Violence among children
- Cyberbullying
- Thould we worry: a handbook for adolescents for parents and professionals
- Violent behaviors of young people - why love matters (A guide for parents)
- Is it possible that it is love - a handbook on violence in young people’s relationships

https://www.poliiklinika-djece.hr/category/english/publications/
Literature:


