

Podcast Q&A: Strategies for reducing teen dating violence and sexual assault in the U.S. A conversation with Angela Rose, Founder and Executive Director of the Promoting Awareness, Victim Empowerment (PAVE).

Interviewer: The office of adolescent health is pleased to welcome to our podcast Angela Rose, founder and executive director of the Promoting Awareness, Victim Empowerment Organization also known as PAVE. A victim of sexual violence herself, Angela founded PAVE herself in 2001 to help people in communities across the country use social, educational, and legislative tactics to shatter the silence of sexual violence. She joins us today to talk about the prevalence of teen dating violence and strategies to tackle teen dating violence among teens and college students. Thanks again for joining us today, Angela. I would like to begin by talking a little bit about PAVE: Promoting Awareness and Victim Empowerment, the organization that you founded. Can you tell us a little bit about the history of the organization and why you founded PAVE?

Angela: Yes, I've been doing community organizing work for about 15 years and it started when I was a teenager. At the age of 17 I was kidnapped from a shopping mall in broad day light. So even though mine was a stranger assault, what I came to find out was how infrequent that is and how rare that is. When it's usually somebody that's known and trusted. And also there was such a pervasive silence around issues of both sexual assault and dating violence. I realized that this is a public health crisis and the silence that surrounds it makes it very difficult sometimes to heal. And so PAVE works on education, action, awareness, and prevention for all types of crimes be it sexual abuse, domestic violence, dating violence, and we have a strong focus on working with youth: both high school and colleges.

Interviewer: Why is it important for us to talk about dating violence and sexual assault here in the U.S.?

Angela: It's so incredibly important because 1 in 3 adolescents in the U.S. is a victim of physical, sexual, emotional, or verbal abuse from a dating partner. Now that is such a huge number. And one thing that I always tell our audiences is that every person knows somebody that's been affected by sexual or domestic violence. And in fact, girls and young women between the ages of 16 -24 experience the highest per capita rate of intimate partner violence. There's a lot of shame and stigma attached so it's very silent. It's very hard for people to talk about. And we also know that youth experiencing dating violence or sexual assault are at an increased danger for a range of other risks like teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and mental health issues. So I think we, as a nation, need to come together to really foster a national movement to shatter the silence and prevent the violence.

Interviewer: Thank you Angela. What would you recommend for providers, or parents, or even friends if someone comes to them and says that they have been a victim of dating violence or sexual assault? How can we support them?

Angela: Some tangible tips, and these are not only for service providers to be talking to their clients or to, you know, at-risk youth, but it's also for, you know, high school students and teens to know how to talk to each other and support each other. So number one is you want to thank that person for sharing that experience with them. It can be very confusing and difficult to open up about a very personal crime that's been committed against them so thank them for sharing that experience with them. And just to believe them is probably one of the most important pieces that you can possibly do is to believe that person. There's so much doubt and self-blame that goes along with issues of dating violence and sexual abuse. And studies have shown that the first person that the survivor tells, if they react well that can greatly impact the healing process. So we need to always believe the people that discloses to us. We need to be a good listener and remain calm. And very important- we need to avoid language that blames the victim. We have a very pervasive victim blaming culture where language is used that puts that on us and that puts the blame on the survivor of this trauma and we need to be very careful to stop doing that because there is so much self-blame and shame around these crimes that we need to make sure that that person doesn't feel that blame. Providing resources and support is another great way to support victims of sexual violence and dating violence. And you know, that's a really great thing because people don't realize that how much support is out there for people that are dealing with these issues. And even just asking: "how can I be there for you now?" Feeling that they're supported and that they have a listening ear is profoundly important. And lastly, let them know that they are not alone. So many people that experience dating violence and sexual abuse feel like they are the only person in this world that is dealing with these things and when they come to find out how often and how widespread these things are it really makes them feel so much more accepted and so much more comfortable knowing that they're not the only ones dealing with this. So reminding them that they're not alone.

Interviewer: What are some tips for how bystanders, whether those bystanders are adults or adolescents themselves, how they can and should intervene?

Angela: Number 1, knowing that stopping dating violence and sexual assault is everyone's business. There's a lot of reasons why people don't intervene. They think, well somebody else will do it why should it be me? And so we need to make a personal pledge to our self that stopping abuse is my business. And number two is to trust your gut. If you think that something is wrong then it probably is. And make a vow to step in, to just change the situation. You can just go up to, you hear maybe a couple arguing you're in high school and you hear a couple- someone's being disrespectful you just step in and make sure that that person is okay and just say: "are you okay?" That can really diffuse the situation. And also, there is so much alcohol facilitated sexual assault in situations of dates. We all need to create an environment that is more supportive of our friends that is more respectful and we also need to have a higher level of respect for ourselves. And, you know, for better or worse there really is this hook-up culture going on in high schools and we can't ignore it. So many parents don't want to think that this exists but there is a tremendous amount of sexual assault and abuse happening within dates, within

acquaintances. Sometimes even at school. And we can't ignore those things, so we need to be mindful and have that inner knowing that we will step in when we see that something is wrong.

Interviewer: Historically dating violence and sexual assault have been thought of as women's issues. But are men affected as well?

Angela: You're right, historically, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence has been thought of as women's issues in the past, but things are changing. Not just thinking of how often, men can be survivors as well but also to encourage men to be a part of the solution. So first and foremost we know that there are a tremendous amount of men and boys who have experienced dating violence, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and emotional abuse as well. And what we hear from so many of these young men is that they don't know where to turn and how difficult it is for them to talk about these crimes because they feel that it's a threat to their masculinity. And they're afraid of what their guy friends are going to think if they talk about these crimes and so they keep it often times very silent and they don't know where to go in terms of resources so we have partnered with some wonderful groups like oneinsix.org and malesurvivor.org and different groups that specifically deal with men that survived trauma and know that they're not alone. Give them the help and support they need. But on the flip side of that men as allies is profoundly important to encourage both men and women to be a part of the solution. There are some great groups like [men can stop rape](http://mencanstoprape.org) out there. And other groups talking about what men can do to work with women to really end these crimes and there's some great things that we've seen like the campaign of Walk a Mile in Her Shoes which is men wearing women's high heels doing a walk to raise awareness about gender-based violence. It's fun ways to encourage men to get involved but to really educate oneself is so important and to really respect and ask for consent. One thing that we really awareness on is in dating situations asking "can I hold your hand? Can I hug you? Can I kiss you" asking if things are okay because that notion of consent is a freely given "yes," not the absence of a "no." And for men and women to be on the same page of you know, communication and talking to each other and I think that that is so important. We do a lot of work on college campuses and in high schools with athletic teams and with fraternities and sororities but the message being you are leaders on campus and it is a choice to be either a part of the problem or more importantly a part of the solution. And having that leadership-based training to encourage them to step in that if they see something they have to say something. And I think taking a very positive and proactive approach at a historically very difficult and dark issue you know trauma, abuse, violence- those are tough issues to talk about. Especially for teenagers- and for their parents. But to create an environment that's proactive and positive and encourages people to be a part of the solution is something that I think is very, very important.

Interviewer: So what specific advice do you have for service providers working with teens?

Angela: So some advice that I have for service providers working with teens are to educate on what are the characteristics of an unhealthy relationship and also what are the characteristics of a healthy relationship. You know, all too often we don't see that in the media all that often. Healthy relationships between partners or friends really. So just some examples of an unhealthy relationship or jealousy, mistrust, codependence, fear, lack of support for the things that that

person enjoys. Manipulation, guilt for spending time with friends or family, forced sexual contact, and threat of violence. And the last part is important there doesn't have to be any physical violence for it to be a dating-violent relationship. The emotional abuse that emotional invisible abuse the impact that that has for young men and women is profound. And I think that it really works to take peoples' you know, their self-esteem away and you know, emotional abuse it's going to be interpreted as a systematic tearing down of another human being. It can be ignoring or rejecting, terrorizing, isolating, verbally assaulting, denying, and minimizing. And now on the flipside of that focusing on the healthy relationship side is also important. So teaching teens what it means to be in a healthy relationship and the characteristics that go along with that. Having support, respect of oneself and each other, good communication, equality, true comfort in being your true self, having your relationship based in a strong friendship, and a sense of inner dependence with mutual responsibility- that you both have your own lives but that you come together and you're both responsible for your own happiness but that you enjoy the time that you spend together. And I'll share with you a story. On a college campus there was a teenager that sat through one of our presentations that talked about these issues the healthy versus unhealthy relationships and as she sat there looking at these slides she realized that everything in her relationship was on the unhealthy relationship category and there was not one thing that was healthy about their relationship. There was emotional abuse absolutely, there was physical abuse, as well as forced sexual contact which is sexual assault. And so she had lived in such denial and fear and didn't tell her family what she was dealing with until she was educated to see that it was that moment that she decided end that three year relationship and to this day she feels so incredibly free. She's gotten her self-confidence back. And so for service providers we need to educate our young people on what a healthy and unhealthy relationship looks like. And I think when we're working with teens we really need to use their language and their ideas. So using social media, using media and pop culture when we're talking about these issues. I think you know, getting them to have a conversation about Rhianna and Chris Brown and how much victim-blaming there was for Rhianna. On "why did she go back?" or "what did she do to deserve this?" which I found to be so disheartening in our movement within the media- how many times she was blamed. And having a conversation about that. One other idea is to use the film *Twilight* and talk about all the characteristics of an unhealthy relationship which often pop up when talking about these things. So getting teens to talk about these issues in their own language, in their own world, is really important. And one last piece of advice that I can't stress enough is how important it is to encourage teens who are dealing with this-either dating violence or sexual assault- to go to the police to report- and to go to the hospital. Because even if there aren't any external injuries there could be internal injuries that one needs to make sure you are taking care of. If there was sexual assault, there could be STD scare or pregnancy issues. So, even if people don't want to press charges, at least getting it on a police report, getting to the hospital to make sure that person is healthy is really, really important. And, you know, I think making sure that they know that they have advocates that can go with them. They do not have to go through this alone. Every community, practically, has a rape crisis center or a domestic violence advocate that can accompany them to the police, to the hospital. And you know these things aren't easy to go through the system, but it's important because they need to know that there's support out there and to make sure that they're taken care of.

Interviewer: Thank you Angela, and thank you for being with us today. For our last question, if someone we know has been a victim of teen dating violence or sexual assault, is there some place that we can go for help?

Angela: If you or someone you know is a victim of dating violence or sexual assault, reach out right away. The national dating abuse helpline is 1-866-331-9474. And you can also chat with someone live at <http://www.loveisrespect.org>

Interviewer: Thank you that concludes our podcast for today. Thanks to all of you for joining the Office of Adolescent Health as we explored ways to reduce teen dating violence and sexual assault in the United States. Thanks to Angela Rose the founder and executive director of Promoting Awareness, Victim Empowerment or PAVE. The PAVE organization can be found at shatteringthesilence.org.

Angela: And we'd love for you to stay connected with us. You can tweet me at @angelarosepave and you can connect with us via social media and we'd love to stay in-touch with you. As service providers you're on the front lines every day. We can help by providing tangible projects, and tools, and programs that you can provide to these teens to help shatter the silence and prevent the violence.