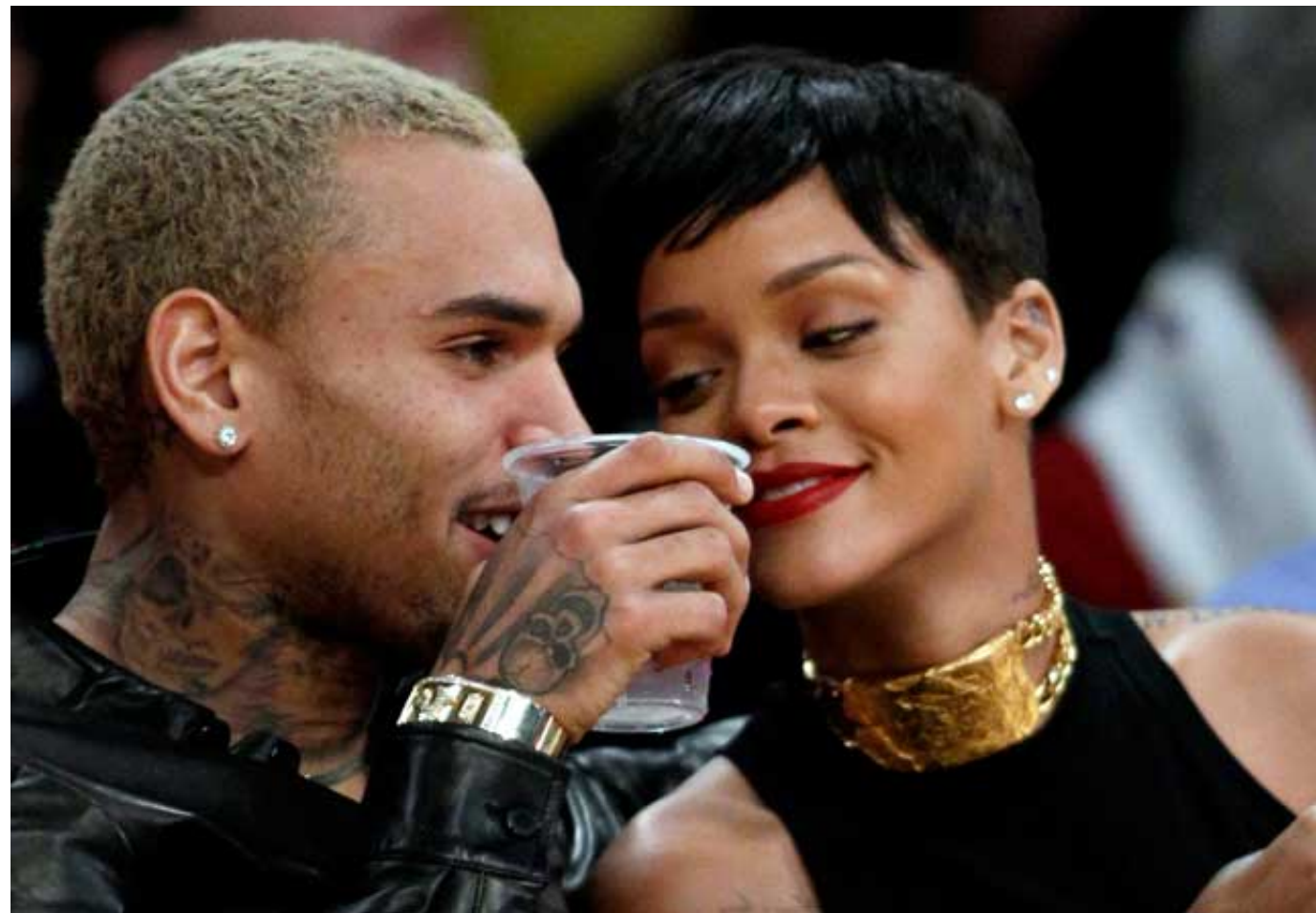


Dating violence: Have we learned anything from Rihanna and Chris Brown?

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The situation between Rihanna and Chris Brown might just be representative of a typical abuse cycle in a dating

The brutal facial injuries in the popular paparazzi photo of abused pop singer Rihanna explicitly depict the horrors associated with the physical aspect of dating violence.

However, what has transpired recently – with the 25-year-old star repeatedly reuniting with her former beau Chris Brown, who in 2009 pled guilty to felony assault after attacking her– adds a familiar wrinkle into the abusive relationship cycle. The abuser apologizes, the victim forgives and for many, the violence returns sooner than later.

Making the entire situation even more surreal are Rihanna's lyrics, "*Just gonna stand there and hear me cry/But that's alright, because I love the way you lie*" from her guest appearance on Eminem 2010 hit single "Love the Way You Lie."

Sure, everyone is entitled to a second chance, this is America, but what has followed in recent months since the Rihanna-Brown reunion is a cultural debate about dating violence.

While in theory such a discussion should appear to be positive, getting the topic out in the open, National Center for Victims of Crime Executive Director Mai Fernandez told us that's not necessarily the case.

"How your parents treat each other is going to be your first model of what you think a good relationship is about," Fernandez said. "And then it's your peers. If your relationship at home with your family is good, you'll look at the celebrity figure and think, 'Wow, that's kind of crazy.' However, if things at home are bad, you might be starting to think, 'Well, this is normal. This is the way everybody reacts to difficult situations and this is how people interact with each other.' If it's bad, this just reinforces the whole thing."

Something else happening with this tailor-made Dr. Phil/TMZ-feeding story is the notion of blame being thrown around. Break the Cycle Senior Education Coordinator Jasmine Ceja told us that Rihanna is often targeted for not getting out of the relationship initially or for not seeking help, and getting back to Chris Brown. However, Ceja pointed out this behavior fits right in line with abuse victims.

"That's what happens in everyday relationships even if they're not celebrities," Ceja said. "The difference is they're a celebrity couple and they are held to the status of a role model even when they don't want to be. I hope there are people by Rihanna that let her know support is out there, and there are several warning signs for her to look at."

Ceja said that a statistic often touted by Break the Cycle, which is a leading national nonprofit organization working exclusively on teen dating violence, is one in three students sometime in their dating life will experience some form of abuse. That equates to roughly 1.5 million high school students with dating abuse defined by a pattern of abusive behavior.

The CDC reported roughly 1 in 5 women and nearly 1 in 7 men who ever experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner, first experienced some form of partner or dating violence between 11 and 17 years of age.



The warning signs include physical, verbal, emotional and sexual abuse. Over the last decade or so, digital abuse has been added to the list. This includes texts, emails and Facebook messaging and stalking.

Rihanna has been targeted for not getting out of the relationship. (Helga Esteb/Shutterstock)

“The internet is the new crime scene of the 21st century,” Fernandez said. “You start with things that are improper or threats over the internet. In what at first can seem innocuous can turn into something that’s criminal.”

Such behavior normally includes extreme jealousy, which may start off in small increments but grow into something larger and troublesome over time. At the core of dating violence are issues of power and control.

Furthermore, what often proves to be confusing for a victim is the abuser’s heartfelt apologies for their behavior.

Commonly the victim in these situations is viewed as having low-self esteem but Ceja pointed out that having a small opinion about one’s self is often the product of being manipulated in an abusive relationship.

“You get to a point where some of these behaviors seem to be normal and that also has a lot to do with families and family environment,” Ceja said. “If you grow up in a home with domestic violence, I think it comes out to like you have a 50 percent chance to repeat that behavior.”

“Sometimes it has to do with how you were raised and sometimes it has to do with what you think is normal. If you’re a teenager and all of your friends are in these types of controlling relationships, it just seems like that’s the way it’s supposed to be.”



The first step off dating violence is recognizing abuse and asking for help. (Shutterstock)

The biggest message that both Ceja and Hernandez stress is that there is a light at the end of the abusive relationship tunnel. The first step is recognizing the abuse and talking to family members or friends about your situation.

“It is possible for people to get out of abusive relationships and have normal healthy relationships in the future,” Ceja said. “It’s just a matter of feeling abuse is not your fault. It’s never the victim’s fault. What you’ve gone through is not going to define you for the rest of your life. It just takes some effort to make those changes and turn something that was horrible and a bad experience into something positive.”

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