

# Monthly Newsletter

## February 2026



**Clinician Spotlight:**  
**Janet Howard, MSW,**  
**LCSW**  
**Location: Reading**

Janet brings more than 30 years of experience in human services and over 15 years of dedicated work in mental health to her role at Mind Matters. She earned her Master of Social Work from the University of Pennsylvania and is trained in evidence-based treatment approaches, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Her strong clinical foundation allows her to provide thoughtful, research-informed care tailored to each client's unique needs.

Janet is especially passionate about supporting individuals as they navigate anxiety, life transitions, relational stress, and the lasting impact of past experiences. She understands that seeking support takes courage, and she strives to meet each person with empathy and respect. Her therapeutic style is warm, grounded, and practical—blending clinical insight with compassion and realistic strategies that clients can apply in everyday life.

For clients who desire it, Janet also integrates faith-based perspectives into the therapeutic process, thoughtfully honoring each individual's beliefs and values. She approaches this integration with sensitivity and care, ensuring that therapy remains client-centered and aligned with personal goals.

At Mind Matters, Janet's goal is to create a safe and welcoming space where clients feel truly seen, supported, and empowered. She is committed to helping individuals move toward healing, greater clarity, and meaningful, lasting change.

# Understanding Relational Stress: From Dating to Life Transitions

Relational stress is one of the most common—and often most misunderstood—mental health challenges people experience. Whether someone is newly dating, navigating a long-term partnership, ending a relationship, or adjusting to a major life transition, relationships can deeply affect emotional well-being. February, recognized nationally as Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month, provides an important opportunity to raise awareness about how dating dynamics, relationship safety, and life changes intersect with mental health.

Dating can be exciting, hopeful, and affirming—but it can also bring anxiety, insecurity, and emotional strain. Early romantic experiences often shape how individuals understand attachment, trust, and communication. Many people struggle with fears of rejection, ghosting, comparison through social media, or uncertainty about commitment. These stressors can contribute to symptoms of anxiety and depression, especially when self-worth becomes closely tied to relationship status. Developing healthy dating patterns involves setting boundaries, communicating needs clearly, respecting consent, and recognizing red flags early. Emotional health in dating is supported by self-awareness: understanding personal values, attachment styles, and past relational wounds helps prevent repeating unhealthy cycles.

Unfortunately, not all dating relationships are safe. Dating violence—whether emotional, physical, sexual, or digital—has significant mental health consequences. Abuse does not always begin with physical harm; it often starts subtly through controlling behaviors, isolation from friends or family, excessive jealousy, monitoring of social media, or verbal degradation. Over time, these behaviors can erode a person's self-esteem and create trauma responses such as hypervigilance, panic attacks, difficulty sleeping, and feelings of shame or self-blame. Teen and young adult populations are particularly vulnerable, but dating violence occurs across all age groups, genders, and backgrounds.

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Emotional and psychological abuse can be just as damaging as physical violence. Gaslighting—manipulating someone into doubting their reality—can leave lasting impacts on mental clarity and confidence. Survivors may struggle with trust, both in future relationships and in themselves. The mental health effects of dating violence can include depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, substance misuse, and suicidal ideation. Early education about healthy relationships is crucial. Warning signs include extreme possessiveness, threats, controlling finances or transportation, humiliation in private or public, and pressuring someone into sexual activity. A healthy relationship, by contrast, includes mutual respect, shared decision-making, open communication, emotional safety, and freedom to maintain outside relationships.

Life transitions can intensify relational stress even in otherwise healthy partnerships. Moving to a new city, starting college, beginning or losing a job, becoming a parent, experiencing financial hardship, or grieving a loss can all strain communication and emotional regulation. Major transitions often disrupt routines and social supports, increasing vulnerability to conflict. Couples may discover differing coping styles—one partner may withdraw under stress while the other seeks reassurance. Without intentional communication, misunderstandings can escalate quickly. Stress from life changes can also expose unresolved trauma or attachment wounds, making conflict feel larger than the immediate situation.

Breakups and relationship endings are another significant relational transition. Even when separation is necessary or healthy, grief is real. The end of a relationship can trigger feelings similar to bereavement: sadness, anger, bargaining, loneliness, and identity confusion. People often underestimate how intertwined identity becomes with partnership. Healing requires time, supportive relationships, and often professional guidance. It is important to normalize that grief after a breakup does not mean the decision was wrong—it reflects emotional investment and attachment.

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For individuals leaving abusive relationships, transitions may be particularly complex. Survivors often face practical barriers such as financial dependence, housing instability, or fear of retaliation. Emotional bonds, sometimes referred to as trauma bonds, can make leaving feel confusing or guilt-inducing. Safety planning and professional support are essential. Community awareness and nonjudgmental responses can make a life-saving difference. Instead of asking, “Why didn’t you leave?” we can ask, “How can I support you safely?”

Promoting mental health in the context of relational stress means fostering education, prevention, and accessible support. Schools, workplaces, faith communities, and social organizations can host workshops on healthy communication, consent, and recognizing abuse. Parents and caregivers can model respectful conflict resolution. Friends can practice checking in regularly and creating safe spaces for honest conversations. Therapy—whether individual or couples counseling—can provide tools for emotional regulation, boundary setting, and trauma recovery. Evidence-based approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), trauma-informed therapy, and attachment-focused interventions are particularly effective in addressing relational stress.

If you or someone you know is experiencing dating violence or relationship abuse, confidential help is available. In the United States, the National Domestic Violence Hotline offers 24/7 support at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) and online chat at thehotline.org. Young people can access specialized support through Loveisrespect, which provides text, chat, and phone resources tailored to teens and young adults. In immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number. For those outside the U.S., local crisis centers, domestic violence shelters, and national helplines in your country can provide assistance. Mental health support can also be found through the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988 if relational stress is contributing to emotional crisis or suicidal thoughts.

Relational stress is not a personal failure; it is a human experience shaped by vulnerability, connection, and change. By increasing awareness about healthy dating practices, recognizing the signs of dating violence, and supporting individuals through life transitions, we create communities where emotional safety is prioritized. Relationships should enhance well-being, not diminish it. Through education, open dialogue, and accessible resources, we can empower individuals to build connections rooted in respect, safety, and mutual care—protecting both heart and mind.