



Thankfully, awareness of the harmful impacts of bullying has increased dramatically in recent years, largely due to research into its prevalence and the emotional wounds it inflicts. However, recent studies show technology has made a bad situation far worse.

Those raised in my generation took bullying for granted. It seemed an unwelcome but “normal” part of being a student. What’s more, most adults, including parents and teachers, downplayed the significance and impact of this form of victimization. Their frequent advice, if one could call it that, was to avoid or, absent that, stand up to the perpetrators. Not helpful for most.

Also, there was no recognition of the intensity of the psychological wounds bullying inflicted. Today, we realize the resulting emotional trauma can prove severe, and is often a precursor to adult mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, withdrawal and self-destructive behaviors, including suicide. Some victims display all the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Bad as bullying was during my youth, today it has become worse. Cyberbullying, which occurs online through various social media platforms, has proven more damaging than the old-fashioned in-your-face variety.

Recent research suggests up to one-third of middle and high school students have endured persistent cyberbullying, with girls the most victimized. Over half of these experienced online bullying within the past 30 days, indicating it’s often chronic. Granted a higher percentage of students reported suffering face-to-face bullying rather than that online, but these up front and personal episodes were less frequent and, in many instances, not as emotionally damaging. Why not?

In traditional bullying, one’s tormentor must be physically present and, therefore, visible and known. Often, cyberbullies cloak their identity. Also, they can inflict their damage 24/7, and their slings and arrows expose the victim to a much wider audience of onlookers (sometimes, one’s entire online community), adding to the shaming effect.

While bullies are by no means courageous, at least the old-fashioned ones have to actually face their victims. In contrast, cyberbullies can hide behind technology and snipe from the electronic bushes. Also, they don't need to be bigger, stronger or tougher. All they require is an internet connection, a mean-spirited mindset and a basic grasp of hurtful terminology and tactics.

From the victim's side of things, it can be easier to deal with a real-time bully. Sometimes, one can avoid the individual and stay out of harm's way, or enlist allies for safety in numbers. Even when confronted, there remains the possibility of escaping the interaction or otherwise pushing back, be that physically or psychologically. On occasion, one can stand up to an in-your-face bully. With a cyber one, that proves far more difficult, or impossible.

Most often, cyberbullying involves demeaning comments, false accusations, spreading malicious rumors, sharing compromising photos/videos, and threats of physical violence. So, while not involving "sticks and stones" that break one's bones, so to speak, this form of victimization disproves the rest of the adage ("words will never hurt me"). Words can hurt a great deal. Over two-thirds of those who are cyberbullied report not feeling safe at school, and indicate impairments to their learning, social lives and self-esteem.

Parents, family and teachers who notice a troubling change in a young person's demeanor or behavior should not dismiss it as growing pains, hormonal moodiness or adolescent rebellion. Instead, inquire directly about whether bullying may be taking place. If so, devise a strategy for how to intervene, which should include enlisting the help of teachers and other school personnel.

Standing up to a real-time bully can be tough. Standing up to a cyber one is often tougher still.

Help as much as you can.