

# October is Bullying Awareness Month

By Larry Deavers



October is Bullying Awareness Month. Bullying covers a wide range of activities people commit in an effort to exert power and control over someone else, usually someone they see as some sort of threat to their self-esteem or insecurities, and someone the bully thinks they can easily intimidate without fear of being held accountable.

## BULLYING CAN BE:

- **PHYSICAL** – Physically hurting someone or damaging property.
- **VERBAL** – Making disparaging comments, taunting, threatening, writing cruel things or intimidating.
- **SOCIAL** – Hurting someone's relationships or reputation through spreading rumors, gossip or exclusion.
- **CYBERBULLYING** – Using electronic technology to send threats, cruel messages, rumors, embarrassing pictures or videos. Cyberbullying can be experienced through instant messages, texts, and emails.

Cyberbullying can be especially damaging due to either the complete anonymity of the internet, or at least the emotional distancing enabled by not having to face the person you're speaking to. The social norms of politeness often give way to knee-jerk emotional reactions. For some people, this allows them to express their most base thoughts and comments, with little regard for how it may affect the other person. The damage of bullying via internet can also be widespread and instant.

People who are bullied can suffer significant and even life-long effects. Many people who are severely bullied suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Some of the emotions victims experience include depression, anxiety, loneliness, and decreased self-esteem. For many victims, being targeted becomes all-consuming, and it can become nearly impossible to think about anything else.

The targets of bullying are also at increased risk for suicidality and substance abuse. These risks are not limited to childhood, when the bullying may be primarily occurring, but often extend into adulthood. Those who are bullied may experience an increase in migraines, stomach aches, insomnia and other physical symptoms of stress and anxiety. Even the bully is often at increased risk for depression and anxiety, possibly due to the existence of other contributing circumstances in their lives that led to their bullying behavior, as well as the shame and guilt they may feel.

Ignoring being bullied does not make it go away. Without some intervention, bullying behavior does not stop. So what can you do?

**1** Do not deal with it alone. Go to someone you trust and strategize on how to confront it. Victims can often get

help from their school, teachers, counselors, and parents. If the bullying has involved a crime, the victim should report the incident to law enforcement. Being alone makes the victim more vulnerable and further empowers the bully, as their belief that they will not be held accountable is reinforced.

**2** Bystander intervention has been shown successful. If you are a witness to bullying, consider what steps you can safely take to intervene. That may mean stepping in or maybe just reporting it to someone in authority. The more the bully gets the message that this behavior is not acceptable, the more empowered the victim becomes, as well. It can also be helpful for bystanders to reach out to the person being bullied.

**3** Friendship has been shown to be a protective factor from the consequences of bullying. Resilience is often developed through the support of friends and having positive, caring relationships with adults. Bullies are more attracted to potential victims who are alone and vulnerable. Victims can feel isolated, so taking the initiative to build relationships with them can go a long way to empowering them, as well as helping them overcome their anxiety and stress.

**4** Collect evidence. When someone is the victim of cyberbullying, they should not respond to the messages. However, it's important to collect evidence of the harassment in order to report it. Taking screenshots and printing out emails and text messages can help victims with any efforts they make in reporting it.

**5** Parental involvement can go a long way toward preventing bullying. Some things parents can do to keep their children safe from cyberbullies include monitoring what children are doing online, asking for their passwords in order to check their online activity and periodically just asking them if anyone is harassing them online. Do your best to maintain a healthy line of communication with your child so they will feel comfortable letting you know when they are experiencing bullying of any kind.

There are also ways that victims of bullying can reach out for help that will lessen or eliminate the long-term effects. Reaching out to mental health professionals, processing your experience with others who have had similar experiences, practicing methods of reducing stress and anxiety, and building a positive self-image are positive ways of counteracting the negative effects of bullying.

Larry Deavers is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Executive Director of Family Counseling Service in Tuscaloosa.