

How do you deal with bullies?

In our column and podcast series, Professor Sarah Niblock, CEO of UKCP, explores real-life challenges that affect us all and how therapy can help. This month, we look at how to handle the bullies we meet in our lives



Bullies, we've all encountered them. Whether they're intimidating bosses or colleagues, controlling partners, shaming relatives, even unnerving neighbours – their impact is felt deeply. We come across them at work, in the street and online. Our computer screens are a powerful tool for good, until faceless trolls start attacking with words of hate.

A growing body of evidence confirms that bullying is one of the worst experiences we can endure. It attacks our sense of self. The effects are profound, long-lasting and acutely felt. Research shows that those of us who have been bullied are more likely to suffer from mental health issues, suicidal thoughts and depression.

It's not you, it's me – or is it?

As children, we're led to believe it's just an inevitable part of growing up. We blame ourselves when we are victims of bullying – maybe I could do something differently, why me, why not that person? Let me tell you straight, there's nothing wrong with you. Some of the most successful icons, including Katy Perry, Rihanna and Beyoncé, have shared their own experiences. Our psychotherapists report an increased compulsion to bully in today's competitive society. In a world of winners and losers, people will do anything to inflate their fragile status, including pulling others down.

So much so, that a national police hub has been set up to crack down on bullies who commit online hate crime against other internet users based on their race, religion,

sexual orientation, disability or gender.

In the therapy room, it is very telling that bullying tends to come up only much later in the conversation, if at all. This is because, all too often, those who experience bullying find it so shameful – whether as the perpetrator or recipient – that they can barely speak of it. Just as in childhood, most adults ignore the bully because we're taught that not reacting divests them of their power. Yet in protecting ourselves from further hurt, we're in danger of burying those acutely painful feelings of shame, rather than addressing them.

But what if *you* are the bully? Many of us feel regret at childhood or even more recent misdemeanours. It does not mean that you're a bad person. Psychotherapists describe bullying as a transferring of shame. When our own shame feels unbearable, one coping mechanism is simply to project it out of ourselves and onto another person. The effects are temporary, do not remove – and may even compound – the original shame.

Certainly, the internet makes it easier for bullies to project their own feelings of inadequacy onto others, perhaps complete strangers. The avatar dilutes any shred of empathy even further. With social media ablaze with representations of 'success', where are we to channel our feelings of inadequacy if we don't meet that ideal? Talking can definitely help and is the first step in tackling the matter, whether it's a current situation or something that happened many moons ago.

PHOTOGRAPH: PAL HANSEN. HAIR AND MAKE-UP: CARL STANLEY

What should we do if we think we're being bullied? If it's taking place at work, keep a diary with dates and details, and speak to your employer or HR department for guidance. You may also have a trade union representative you can consult. One of our biggest fears about making a complaint at work is that it will mark us out as weak, or that it could even escalate once the accused finds out.

What you can do

Psychotherapists recommend that anyone witnessing a bullying incident support the recipient, so that they're not confronting the issue alone. Or you might wish to speak to the bully or harasser directly. Alternatively, if the bullying is actually happening, react with questions such as, 'Why are you saying that?' – pushing the statement back onto them.

Bullying is a hugely complex topic manifested in myriad ways. What's clear is that whether you've been bullied or have done the bullying, it is not a reflection of how good a person you are or a sign that something's wrong with you. Working with a UKCP psychotherapist will help you to confront your vulnerability, address emotions that may have been buried for a long time, releasing you from their control, so that you can live your life with confidence.

ASK THE EXPERT...

Psychotherapist Sue Cowan-Jenssen talks about ways in which we can combat bullying behaviour



Q What is the definition of bullying?

There's no legal definition of bullying, but I think of it as repeated behaviour by an individual or group with the aim of demeaning, shaming, humiliating or threatening another person. This can occur within a family, peer group, school, workplace, community or online.

bully's motives and actions, you take the focus off yourself and turn it on them. The bully wants to feel better by making someone feel worse.

Q If you think you use bullying behaviour, what steps can you take to change?

If you find yourself tempted to bully, you also know that it's coming from an unhappy place in yourself. It requires looking at unwanted feelings and admitting that your need to find relief from these feelings is making you cruel. If you bully, it is because you have contempt, rather than compassion, for the vulnerable part of yourself. If you could have more empathy, you wouldn't have to 'dump' your pain on another. Compassion for self and others is a crucial anti-bullying tool.

Q If you feel that you are being bullied, what can you do about it?

Speak up. Being bullied can feel shameful because you wonder why it's *you* that is being targeted. Talking is a powerful antidote. Ideally, if it's happening at work, report it. In the podcast [details below], I mention a technique that can help when you feel attacked, which I think of as the 'mirror' technique. By honing in on the

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LISTEN TO THE TALKING THERAPIES PODCAST

How to deal with bullies

Listen to psychotherapist Sue Cowan-Jenssen and UKCP's Matt Nicholls discuss the shame bullying creates and strategies to stop it. See psychologies.co.uk/how-handle-bullying-podcast-ukcp

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• **The UKCP** Alongside professional support for our members, we are the leading research, innovation, educational and regulatory body working to advance psychotherapies for the benefit of all. Our membership includes more than 8,000 therapists and 70 training and accrediting organisations. Members work privately, in public health or third-sector organisations, offering a range of approaches for couples, individuals, families and groups.

• **To find the right therapist**, log on to psychologies.co.uk/find-a-therapist and look at our Life Labs Channel of experts who may be able to help, or visit psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist to locate a therapist near you.

