

"I know it shouldn't but it still hurts"

Bullying and Adults: Implications and Interventions for Practice

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KEYWORDS

- Workplace violence • Bullying cyberbullying • Adults
- Interventions

"I know it shouldn't but it still hurts: Bullying and Adults"

Sharon, a 35-year-old, recently divorced, public school teacher describes her entry into the world of technology. "I joined a social network to find old friends and to keep up with current ones. Everyone is doing it. I thought this is how people socialize today." She then relates that she was "de-friended" by a group of women that she went to high school with. "I have no idea what I did, they just dumped me, I feel like I am sixteen again." She describes that she spent 2 nights reviewing everything that she wrote to see if she somehow offended someone.

John is a 28-year-old, single, gay, social worker. He is an avid, frequent user of a popular social network. "It keeps me connected. I always know what is going on." One day he was visiting a coworker's homepage and there was a picture posted, with John's face attached to another person's body. The body was nude and holding a large bottle of liquor. The caption underneath said, "The fag can't hold his liquor." "I cried. How many people saw that picture?" He shared that his friend removed it and said it was "just a joke." John verbalizes that he now feels anxious in social settings.

Kevin, a 35-year-old, married father of two children is a police officer. He describes his immediate supervisor as a bully. "I'm a constant target of his craziness. The other guys tell me, 'you're it, it's your turn.'" Apparently, other officers have been verbally abused by this bully in the past. Kevin describes being told to do one thing and,

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when it is done, being reprimanded for doing it. “And this guy is good. You should see the show he puts on for the big boss—he makes it look like I screwed up!” Kevin reports calling out sick and numerous other somatic complaints. He shares, “Secretly, I hope he finds a new victim. I don’t want anyone else to suffer like I have, but I am at the end of my rope.”

These examples are client scenarios from the author’s clinical practice. Bullying is a national health problem affecting millions of children and adolescents. The literature is replete with articles examining bullying and cyberbullying of youth. Literature on bullying of adults is generally confined to workplace violence and harassment. No literature describes cyberbullying and adults.

There is an expectation that, as children mature into adults, bullying behavior will decrease.¹ As children mature and learn empathy, they are better able to understand how their actions can make other people feel. Society often views bullying as a problem of youth. There are many programs in place to educate young people about the effects of bullying. There are few such programs for adults.²

This creates a veil of silence for the adult victims of bullying. The victims also believe that this is a problem of childhood. Furthermore, bullied adults have a difficult time telling their stories and trying to make sense out of what is happening to them and why they are feeling as they do. They often blame themselves for their situation. This blame is validated by others who believe that the bullied are just thin-skinned, that the real world is tougher than the playground, and that victims or bullying targets should just grow up.

This article discusses workplace and cyberbullying of adults, identifies implications for nursing practice, and suggests interventions to identify and assist the victims of bullying.

WORKPLACE BULLYING

Workplace bullying is a big problem. According to recent research, 25% to 30% of the United States workforce are bullied or verbally abused sometime during their work lives.^{3,4} If this many workers are being bullied, clearly it is not just a problem for a few overly sensitive or disgruntled employees.

Adult bullying at work is defined as situations in which employees are exposed to repeated, persistent, negative acts that are intimidating, malicious, and stigmatizing.² Victims usually report that they are unable to stop the behavior once it becomes an established mode of interaction.⁵ Bullied workers generally perceive the abuse as intentional efforts to control, harm, or drive them from the workplace.⁶

Why Do Some Adults Become Workplace Bullies?

Workplace bullies often feel the need to be in control of all aspects of the work environment.⁵ Bullies may also have an exaggerated sense of self, low self-esteem, or a lack of ability to feel remorse or guilt about inflicting harm on others.^{7,8} Bullies who are unable to feel empathy were probably always bullies. They are the adult version of the playground bully. Attempting to gain self-esteem by hurting others is pathological and is painful to the victims of such abuse. The adult bully is unable to break the psychological cycle that he or she learned as a child and carries on that destructive behavior in their home, work, or social environment.⁹

Workplace Bullying Behaviors

Bullying behaviors in the workplace includes public name-calling, spreading of malicious rumors, increasing work pressures, sexual harassment, and physical

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