



By Marion Scher
Author of *Big Bully: An Epidemic of Unkindness*

BIG BULLY

AN EPIDEMIC OF UNKINDNESS

The first question I get asked as the author of this book is why bullying? Quite simply, after writing my previous book which highlighted 11 people's lived experiences with various mental health issues, the one topic which reoccurred during interviews was bullying. Whether at school, home, the workplace and of course online, I realised this needed more research and exposure.

With Lundbeck's encouragement and backing I was able to spend valuable time researching this topic which we decided to break into four categories: teen/school bullying; relationship bullying; workplace bullying and social media bullying. This latter category, given how it's insidiously woven into the very fabric of our society, runs through every chapter of the book.

Perhaps the hardest part of writing this book was actually getting people to open up to me on their bullying experiences, insisting on anonymity to protect themselves – against further bullying! When I did interview people I could sense just how tough it was for them to relate their experiences to me. They felt ashamed that they'd allowed themselves to be bullied.

Another question I'm asked is what do I think is the worst area of bullying? There is no one area, but social media

definitely has seen this scourge increase with a powerful, subsequent impact. In my previous book 'Surfacing' a number of the interviewees related how when they were bullied at school at least when they went home and closed the door on the outside world they felt 'safe'. These days that doesn't exist, as social media follows you wherever you are. It also makes bullying easier because the bully is able to hide behind a screen.

Teen bullying

This is where social media plays a massive role and where bullying rather than being an 'in your face' experience takes on a whole new look. For instance a teen goes online over a weekend and immediately sees a group of their school mates having fun at a party. A party they weren't invited to! This type of exclusion is just as bad as a slap in the face as that child has to go back to school the next day aware of being left out...

One of the most horrific, but I discovered not uncommon features of teen bullying, is when sexting goes horribly wrong. Imagine discovering your 11 year old daughter has texted nude photos of herself to her 'boyfriend', who when they break up then proceeds to send these out to

his social media group, which could be vast. This girl, at 11 years old may well feel her life is over – and as we're seeing more and more, decides life is no longer worth living. A growing factor in the rise of teen suicide.

The role of schools

The first thing I did when I began my research was to email various well-known high schools to ask permission to speak to teachers and pupils. I received one reply only – from the wonderful Westerford High School in Cape Town, who were enormously helpful in this regard. The rest – as far as they were concerned didn't have a problem. What I came to realise was that it was all about their protecting their brand. They felt if they participated in this project it would look as though they had a problem with bullying, which of course all schools have.

After speaking to schools, parents and teachers the main issues are: lack of willingness to take real responsibility for bullying; communication between all parties; understanding just where teens are with social media.

Relationship bullying

This has been going on since the first caveman grabbed his spouse by her

hair and dragged her out of the cave. The difference again is the subtlety of the bullying. Whether it's financial, emotional, physical or all of these factors, I discovered a common thread was the difficulty in walking away. It's almost easier to stay and battle on, particularly where there were children involved. Again there was almost a shame in admitting abuse had taken place. What surprised me here were colleagues who I'd known for many years and thought were in good relationships, who told me their gruelling stories. The bottom line is that very few people have someone they feel they can trust to open up to and feel supported by. Going to therapy in this country still carries a stigma, which hopefully this book may help disappear.

Workplace bullying

Several key issues came out of my research here. The main one being that human resources is there for the employer not the employee, who generally felt pretty hopeless when it came to reporting any bullying

incidents. The other factor being simple economics - if you're lucky enough to have a job, you must shut up and carry on rather than make any waves.

Social media bullying

As social media and AI grow each day, so their effect on people's lives, especially teens becomes part of this phenomenon. So many young people in particular told me that even though they were aware of the damage social media can inflict, they couldn't stop themselves going online – sometimes up to seven hours a day. This impacts their lives not just when it comes to interacting with those they know, but being exposed to what is seen as the perfect life, with the perfect people, which they simply can't aspire to. They then see themselves as less and this is often a fast track to depression, but that as they say is another whole story – perhaps my next book...

Be kind

And what about the bully? Where and when does bullying begin? For

me, this can be any time between birth and death, caused by imitation or circumstance. In the case of a child are they just replicating what they see at home? In the workplace will they seem weak if they don't take a firm stance, particular for women bosses? There are many scenarios and very few answers here. Perhaps what we need now more than ever is simply a reminder to be kind. Setting a good example with a simple 'please and thank you' to supermarket staff, waiting staff at restaurants, the cleaner at the office. Anyone and everyone we meet on a daily basis. Showing empathy and understanding goes a long way towards a better, happier society.

BIG BULLY – An epidemic of unkindness (Bookstorm) is available at all good book stores.

References available on request. MHM

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Due to a printing error in Volume 10 Issue 4, this article has been reprinted.

