

Psychological effects of bullying on adolescents and ways to mitigate them

Bullying is an aggressive and forceful behaviour that usually involves the use of real or perceived power to hurt others or a targeted person either verbally, physically or socially (U.S department of Health and Human Services, 2019). It is a rapidly growing issue affecting millions of adolescents worldwide (Pacer’s National Bullying Prevention Centre, 2023) with devastating consequences on their mental, social and emotional well-being (Zwierzynska et al., 2012) persisting for a long period of time even up to adulthood (Coughlan, S. 2013). These include issues like depression, low self-esteem, self-harm and even suicide, and over the years, around a hundred thousand young people within the ages 15 to 24 years die from suicide in the United Kingdom (RCPCH 2020).

The BMC Psychiatry article by Ye et al. (2023) explains “adolescence as a crucial stage for physical and mental development”. It involves growth from childhood to adulthood, and the evolution of self and social awareness. It is the stage when behavioural patterns, personality, emotional independence and cognitive functions are established, however, bullying at this sensitive stage would lead to negative consequences subjecting victims to a lifestyle of social anxiety, nightmares, depression, and many more, affecting their academic performance and ability to thrive in society.

Moreover, research shows that adolescents who are bullied develop several mental health disorders and issues like eating disorders, psychosis, and many more which can still manifest more than 40 years later (King’s College London, n.d.).

Recently, the National Centre for Education Statistics (2020) also revealed that “1 in 5 students aged 12-18 report being bullied, many of which stem from peers or socio-economic differences,

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and despite the high prevalence, fewer than half of victims report it to the authorities”. There is an urgent need for more effective approaches to tackle bullying in schools and the population at large. This article will explore the psychological impact of bullying on the mental, social and emotional well-being of adolescents and analyse effective measures to alleviate its impact, creating a safer environment for adolescents.

A primary effect of bullying is its impact on mental health. According to a study published in the BMC Psychiatry article by Ye et al. (2023) “bullied adolescents are 2.77 times more likely to develop depression compared to their peers”. The painful experiences caused by bullying often lead to depression, low self-esteem and the development of borderline personality disorders. These adolescents could begin to question their worth, become violent and lose interest in activities they once enjoyed (Ye et al. 2023).

Furthermore, they could withdraw from society to avoid criticism from bullies and peer victimisation (Yassin, F. 2024) resulting in social isolation. This often deprives them of social support, further increasing the risk of depression, anxiety and even eating disorders, which victims might indulge in to cope with the emotional toll, as studies show that bullies and bullied victims are highly likely to develop an eating disorder (Copeland, W.E., 2015).

Consequently, victims could develop social anxiety; a fear of social situations and humiliation or rejection from peers further leading to trust issues, making it difficult for them to form new

relationships or maintain present ones (National Health Service, 2021). With prolonged and frequent bullying, these issues can evolve into complicated conditions such as Post-traumatic

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stress disorder (PTSD), which can be characterised with repressed emotions and or aggression (American Addiction Centre, n.d.).

In addition, victims could indulge in self-harm like pulling clumps of hair, cutting and biting arms, and hurting their selves. They could also adopt the use of harmful substances like alcohol and drugs to ease pain and cope with emotional instability, which often leads to substance abuse. The collective influence could leave victims feeling trapped and overwhelmed increasing the risk of suicide as they are between 2 to 9 times more likely to consider suicide than non-victims (Peterson, S. 2018).

Moreover, victims could develop long-term cognitive difficulties like poor memory, impulsive decision-making, lack of concentration, insomnia and nightmares (Menken et al. 2023) as a result of anxiety, negatively influencing the hippocampus, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex responsible for processing fear, decision-making and emotional stability. This leads to altered behavioural and physiological responses due to stress-induced structural remodelling.

These changes in brain structures increase alterations in the white matter further increasing the risk of depression. They also disrupt communication between brain regions hindering emotional understanding and regulation. Furthermore, increased cortisol levels heighten stress reactivity altering reward processing areas which can lead to a higher risk of substance abuse. All these can

negatively impact the immune system leading to inflammation and associated health issues like obesity and hypertension (Dana Foundation, 2023).

Finally, the effects of bullying are not only damaging but also long-term as bullied adolescents could continue to struggle up into adulthood and even their 50s. These could include insomnia, emotional distress, poor health, low socio-economic status and many other psychological effects

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that could hinder their adult life affecting their work, relationships and overall self-management (Anon, n.d.). This can make it difficult for them to achieve their goals, cope with challenges, and even start a family.

There is the need for protective and preventive measures to address the impact of bullying, and early intervention and support to facilitate recovery. To achieve this, early detection and screening procedure should be promoted. These include regular check-ins and mental well-being surveys which help to quickly identify potential victims and signs of emotional distress (Bacp.co.uk, 2018).

Additionally, intervention strategies could be adopted, these prevent escalation of mental health issues and promote the recovery of victims. These could be access to support systems which are safe spaces or rooms that serve as platforms for open communication with trusted individuals.

These spaces serve as a form of release for victims, enhancing their ability to regain control over their emotional and mental well-being therefore providing a sturdy foundation for recovery.

Professional counselling services could also be provided in schools by cooperating with experts like counsellors and psychologists, to organise forums in form of group and individual therapy,

and conduct relief sessions, enabling victims to learn healthy coping skills, develop emotional resilience and tackle trauma (Chloë Finet et al. 2023).

This is effective in curbing stress, self-harm and suicidal behaviours. Moreover, teachers could also be trained to provide support through strategies that not only help identify potential victims and the signs of emotional distress, but also create safe learning environments and educational workshops that focus on managing emotions, reducing stress and nurturing students to share their personal experiences (Chloë Finet et al. 2023).

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Furthermore, peer-led programmes like the Diana Award anti-bullying programme, Olweus bullying prevention programme, KiVa and Learning together are also good instances of support systems. These can serve as a supportive community for students to actively engage in bullying prevention and offer a sense of belonging, understanding, and connection to victims through peer-to-peer mentorship, mediation, guidance and group defence against bullying (Peer Support, n.d.).

These provide a positive learning environment and also empower students to support each other and build empathy. It is also very essential that parents are involved in the support of their children (Rock, A. 20201), since a significant amount of their time is spent in the home, the school and community could also provide the required resources to assist parents in catering for any of their adolescents that might be a victim of bullying.

Moreover, the community could also provide free and accessible support services to bullied victims and their families and promote positive youth development by addressing social inequalities like ethnic backgrounds which could contribute to bullying in the community. They

could collaborate with the media by responding to online bullying through campaigns that raise awareness promoting social changes.

Another effective measure is to create an inclusive and welcoming learning environment, by establishing restorative alternatives instead of retributive zero tolerance policies. These empower teenagers and youths with emotional and social skills to overcome bullying and its effects (Gedikoglu, M. 2021).

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These include providing access to confidential reporting systems, implementing reward systems that promote positive behaviours, training students on how to effectively resolve disagreements and conflicts that could lead to bullying, and encouraging them to speak up and stand up to bullying without putting their selves at risk (Ribble, M. 2015).

Additionally, making them aware of the importance of their mental health and educating them about online bullying prevention and safety practices, as well as media literacy and responsible internet use can significantly reduce the occurrence of bullying and promote healthy social relationships (Psychnet.apa.org, n.d.).

In conclusion, bullying is a vicious cycle affecting both bullies and bullied victims, with increased rate of antisocial personality behaviours and psychological disorders and the harmful effect on the emotional, mental and social development of adolescents, there is an urgent need for a cooperative response involving schools, parents, mental health professionals and the community. By adopting restorative approaches, providing accessible mental health resources,

and fostering supportive environments, we can greatly reduce the prevalence of bullying and create a safer and inclusive environment for adolescents to thrive.

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