

Bullying

Of all the problems that I come across in counselling, bullying is the one that frustrates me the most. It is so unnecessary. However, and this is very sad, bullying does appear to create bullies. Those who have been persecuted or abused do seem to go on to persecute and abuse others and we can see this on a national and international scale as well as in people's personal lives. It seems like where there are humans, there is bullying. That doesn't mean I think we should give up – on the contrary, I think we must do all that we can to help bullies stop bullying. But we must also help the bullied – and that, in a way, is easier because it tends to be the bullied who seek help. Unfortunately, I never seem to have anyone coming to me saying, 'Please help me – I keep bullying people and I want to stop.' I wish I did. I would be more than glad to try.

So – and I think this is the most likely scenario – if you're reading this because you are a victim of bullying, this is mainly for you. Bullies are out there. You can go down the disciplinary route – see your form tutor, your Head of Section, the deputy-head, the Headmaster – and get support that way. Sometimes that is all that is needed.

You can also do two other things:

1. Deploy your own anti-bully strategies.
2. Consider what it is about your behaviour that makes you look like an easy target and decide whether you'd like to address it and if so, how. This does not mean I support the idea that 'some people are just victims'. What it does mean is that, given that some people choose to bully others, it makes sense not to look like prey!

ANTI-BULLY STRATEGIES

Some years ago, I went to an anti-bullying presentation by Robert Higgson during PSHE. As someone who has experienced bullying himself, he was able to give some helpful tips. He had some neat ways of turning verbal abuse around such as:

1. Use humour. Try to make witty rejoinders. Laugh it off.
2. Use 'the broken record technique'. This is where you keep saying the same thing back, over and over again. You might decide to say, 'What you're doing is bullying. I think you should seek help.' Then, whatever the bully says, you just keep saying your line. Be completely unvarying and keep your cool.
3. Ask direct questions. The aim is to be very pro-active, rather than just 'taking it'. You are responding, rather than reacting from the gut. So if the bully says, 'You're gay,' you might say, 'What makes you think it's OK to use the word 'gay' as an insult?' If they respond with another insult, you question that – and so on, till they get bored.
4. Make 'I' statements. ie. naming the behaviour, how you feel and what you'd like them to do. Eg. 'I think you are being very rude and I feel insulted. Please go away and leave me alone.' If you want to follow up with a threat. Eg. 'If you don't stop, I am going straight to my Head of Section,' then you **MUST** carry out that threat. Not doing so will look weak and like you're a soft touch.

Fogging

This technique needs a bit more explanation. This is where you very calmly say something that accepts any bit of truth that's in there. eg. The bully tells you you're fat. You say, 'Yeh, I know I'm a bit overweight, thanks.' You're not defensive, you don't let it get to you, you just calmly accept whatever tiny thing they've decided to pick on. 'Your shoes are from Asda!' says the bully. You say, 'Yeh, great value for money!' Cool, calm, not defensive - and you walk away. This way you defuse the insult and show that you can't be got at that way.

Retaliation

You will hear lots of people tell you that the bullying didn't stop until they turned round and thumped the bully. Obviously, you have that option but I'd be being irresponsible to recommend it! It may go horribly wrong and anyway, I don't recommend violence in any circumstances.

You could think carefully about whether verbal retaliation might work for you, however. I remember one of my sons being harassed by a boy at his school. He ignored it on the whole but one day this guy shouted after him, 'You're gay and your girlfriend's ugly.' My son turned round and shouted back something very witty but too rude to repeat! It made the bully look extremely foolish. This is risky territory though – you'll need to judge for yourself the pros and cons!

Addressing your own behaviour.

This isn't easy. Essentially, you're going to have to do some real soul-searching – and you may well find this is easiest in counselling or in discussion with an adult. But it is also worth asking your friends if they can see what may be going wrong. I am not suggesting that bullies have any excuse for their behaviour – they haven't – but they will attack those that look like the easiest targets so you will need to consider whether there is something going on that makes you look like one!

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we didn't have to have this problem? Or if everyone was brave and strong enough to do what Robert Higgson also recommended - to be 'defenders' not bystanders? Sometimes, nowadays, these people are called 'upstanders' or 'active bystanders'.

Our school values include **COURAGE** and **RESPONSIBILITY**. It takes both to stand up to bullying. Here are some simple things that 'defenders' can do.

- **Never give bullies an audience or applause.**
- **Never join in.**
- **Never pretend bullying is 'banter'.**

- **Always report bullying.**
- **Always treat others with respect.**
- **Always ask yourself, 'How would I feel if this was happening to me?'**