

Social form of bullying linked to depression, anxiety in adults

April 22 2008

Spreading rumors and gossiping may not cause bruises or black eyes, but the psychological consequences of this social type of bullying could linger into early adulthood, a new University of Florida study shows.

In a study of 210 college students, UF researchers discovered a link between what psychologists call relational victimization in adolescence and depression and anxiety in early adulthood, according to findings published online this month in the journal *Psychology in the Schools*. Rather than threatening a child with physical violence, these bullies target a child's social status and relationships by shunning them, excluding them from social activities or spreading rumors, said Allison Dempsey, a doctoral student in the UF College of Education and the study's lead author.

“Even though people are outside of high school, the memories of these experiences continue to be associated with depression and social anxiety,” said Dempsey, who graduated from Columbine High School in Colorado one year before the 1999 school shooting there and now studies school prevention programs. “It was interesting to see these relationships still continue to exist even though they are in early adulthood now and in a completely different setting.

“I'm hoping this study will help shed light on the fact that this is a real problem and continues to be a real problem after students leave school.”

To uncover the relationships between social bullying and loneliness,

depression and anxiety, researchers surveyed college undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 25 and asked them to recall their experiences from high school. They were also looking to see if having friends mitigated some of the effects of bullying and if there was any relationship between gender and the severity of psychological symptoms, said Eric Storch, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychiatry in the UF College of Medicine and a co-author of the study.

“About 20 years ago people thought of bullying as very physical,” Storch said. “As a result people thought guys did the bullying, and that it wasn’t really a big experience for girls. The problem is that isn’t actually true. There are different types of aggression.

“Boys do tend to be more physical, but both sexes engage in relational victimization. We wanted to see if gender affected strength of the relationship between depressive symptoms and victimization.”

But researchers found no gender difference in the link between this type of bullying and depression. They also discovered that having friends or other positive social relationships didn’t lessen rates of depression and anxiety in adulthood, a finding that surprised them, Dempsey said.

For some children, having friends and positive support can help make them more resilient to the slings and arrows from bullies, Storch said. But other children take the words and abuse more to heart and begin to believe what’s being said about them.

“Those types of negative thoughts are actually believed to be at the core of things like depression and anxiety,” Storch said. “Behaviorally what starts happening is you avoid interactions and situations that could be quite positive for you.”

Currently, there are few prevention or intervention programs that focus

specifically on relational victimization, in part because it's tougher to pinpoint and stop, Dempsey said.

“If a child tries to punch someone or kick someone, there's evidence of that happening,” Dempsey said. “There's a definite aggressor and a definite victim. When it comes to spreading rumors and gossiping, that's a lot more difficult to prove who's doing it. And it's harder to provide consequences.”

Dempsey said she hopes this study and others will help other researchers and psychologists design programs that can help stop this form of bullying in schools.

“I think many people have the belief that victimization is a normal rite of passage in childhood,” Storch said. “While it certainly does happen to most kids, it's not acceptable. And while I think it would be difficult to completely curtail it, by reducing it you're going to help someone a tremendous amount to not have to go to school and be plagued by this environment of being tortured day in and day out.

“This isn't a normative experience and we need to do something about it and recognize that not doing something could affect children who are really rising stars.”

Wendy Troop-Gordon, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at North Dakota State University, said understanding how past relational bullying affects people in adulthood is an important step forward for research in this field.

“Turning 18 is not a magical age when you leave all of these experiences behind,” said Troop-Gordon, who is not affiliated with the study. “People do seem to carry these experiences with them.”

Source: University of Florida

Citation: Social form of bullying linked to depression, anxiety in adults (2008, April 22)
retrieved 19 February 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-04-social-bullying-linked-depression-anxiety.html>

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