

Cyberbullying on the College Campus

Tips, Tools & Solutions for Recognizing & Stopping Bullying Online

Melissa Rucker, Claire K. Hall, J.D.

Bullies have always existed, so why is it important to address cyberbullying? In a nutshell, it can be extremely detrimental to the victim's physical and mental health and, in some cases, possibly deadly. Since cyberbullying allows the anonymity of bullying from a distance, it can also be easily hidden from parents, friends and school administrators and adds an almost invisible dimension to the traditional face-to-face bullying that can be hard to detect and address. While the statistics of college cyberbullying are not yet well-defined, a study called [VISTAS](#), a project sponsored by the American Counseling Association, found that up to 22 percent of college students reported being bullied online and 38 percent of participants knew someone who had been bullied online. Continue reading to learn more about cyberbullying and what you can do about it.

FAQ: Understanding Cyberbullying

Where does cyberbullying occur?

Cyberbullying can happen in many places, all of which are related to the Internet. Social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, are among the most common places where bullying happens. Students might also receive nasty emails, threatening text messages, rude or cruel instant messages or even entire websites devoted to tearing them down.

When does cyberbullying occur?

Sometimes college cyberbullying lasts only as long as the proactive individual allows it to last. For instance, the victim might shut down their social media accounts and block texts and IMs from offending parties, yet not all victims of bullying can take such steps. For instance, someone who must use a social media account for work or school cannot easily close their accounts. Also, a victim with a persistent bully will have much more trouble shaking their aggressor, as the perpetrator can continue to make extra fake accounts to continue their harassment, possibly for years.

How does cyberbullying happen?

Cyberbullying usually doesn't have the component of physical threats, as face-to-face bullying does. However, the psychological effects of bullying online might be much worse. Cyberbullying is nerve wracking in that the person being bullied never knows when and where to expect another attack. They often have little protection, as bullies will change user names and hide behind anonymous posts. The result is often serious issues with self-esteem and trust, a greater risk of depression and suicide.

Why does cyberbullying happen today?

As with most bullies, there are issues of low self-esteem and insecurity at play. Cyberbullying is a bit different because the perpetrator doesn't have to physically confront their victim. They can hide behind an anonymous username and bully someone who might never know the source of

their torment. This anonymity can embolden those who would never dream of bullying someone in real life, and, given this power, can create more future targets.

Are there certain populations who are more at-risk for experiencing cyberbullying?

Certain populations are more likely to be targets of such behavior, including young LGBT people especially between the ages of 14 and 16, special needs students and those who live in persistent poverty.

How can cyberbullying negatively impact students?

Cyberbullying can cause a decline in academic performance, increase in school dropouts, physical violence and suicide. "Suicide is the most severe consequence of cyberbullying, but there are many other symptoms that can result when a person is the victim of cyberbullying," said Claire K. Hall, higher education attorney and Principal of UECAT Compliance Solutions. "Victims are at greater risk for depression. They are also more likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs. Therefore, it is critical that college students understand that they do not have to handle cyberbullying alone, and that there are so many people on their campus who can help them, if they just reach out."

Types of Cyberbullying

Flaming

A confrontation often happening on message boards or other public online spaces, this usually entails one or more bullies attacking a particular person for their views or comments. The abuse can include harsh images, cruel language and even threats.

Exclusion

This is a singling-out of the targeted person. They are purposefully excluded from chats or ignored on message boards, but to add insult to injury, those who are ignoring that person will often send nasty comments to them or otherwise harass them.

Harassment

This happens when a bully or bullies repeatedly attack one particular person. The harassment might be done in one online space, such as a message board, or it might spill over to other areas, such as text messaging and various social media.

Cyberstalking

This is a type of harassment that involves one or more bullies going to great lengths to gather information about a particular person, continually frightening or threatening them, following them around social media and other sites, and potentially crossing the line into physical stalking and opportunity for physical harm.

Outing

This is the malicious release of personal and private information about a person, usually with the intent to embarrass or humiliate. The outing might take the form of pictures, videos or screenshots, or it could be spiteful rumors about someone's personal life, sexuality or other private information.

Masquerading

This happens when a bully creates a fake identity to harass someone anonymously or to impersonate someone else, often called "fraping," such as pretending to be the victim or a

significant other. The bully might also sign up on various social media sites and masquerade as the victim, creating a negative reputation for the victim. “Even if the cyberbullying is anonymous, students should still report the cyberbullying to a trusted administrator at their college or university,” Hall said. “Reporting it to a resident assistant, faculty member, advisor, or better yet, campus security is a really good idea.”

Trolling

Trolls try to provoke victims through the use of insults, controversial topics or off-topic posts into acting out in a similarly angry way. The provocation includes personal attacks on the victim.

Catfishing

This refers specifically to those cyberbullies who steal photos and information from a victim’s social media account and recreate a fake one of their own, mimicking and pretending to be the victim. This can be especially damaging to college students, who might be befriended by or researched by current or future employers online.

Sexual Harassment Cyberbullying

Sexual harassment cyberbullying does not have to be sexual in nature to be considered harassment. It includes degrading comments about gender or sexual activity, sexual partners or descriptions like “slut” or “whore.” On another level, it also includes sexual advances or comments and photos. Here are a few points to remember:

- Sexual harassment is not limited to women. Men can suffer from sexual cyberbullying, as well.
- Sexual harassment is illegal, even if it happens only online.
- Remember that sending a compromising photo over the Internet or by text, even to someone trusted, doesn’t necessarily mean that picture will remain in trusted hands. Sexual harassment online often involves sending or posting suggestive or sexual photos of the victim.
- Depending upon the particular facts of the bullying, the perpetrators might be in violation of [Title IV of the Civil Rights Act](#) or [Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972](#); these are taken seriously by schools. “Also, if the cyberbullying is a result of harassment based on a protected class, such as race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, then the behavior will constitute a violation of federal law, which all colleges and universities that receive federal funding must comply with,” Hall said. “It is important for students to know what their college or university policies are regarding bullying and harassment, and to take some type of action when they see cyberbullying happening.”
- Always report sexual harassment, whether it happens in person or online. Although the chance of tracking online perpetrators can be tough, escalating the problem to law enforcement can improve those chances.

LGBTQ Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying often happens to those who are considered different or unique. This tends to describe many LGBT youth, whose openness about certain issues of gender and sexuality can lead to an undeserved backlash, which, in turn, can be detrimental to the victims' physical and mental health. Here are some facts about this special kind of bullying, as reported in [Out Online The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth on the Internet](#).

- 82 percent of LGBT youth in 2011 had been the victims of bullying based on their sexual orientation.
- LGBT youth, especially those ages 14 to 16, are twice as likely to suffer from physical abuse or social exclusion.
- LGBT youth were three times as likely as their non-LGBT counterparts to say they had been bullied or harassed online and twice as likely via text message.
- 50 percent of bullies do not understand the depth of suffering their discriminatory language can cause to someone who identifies as LGBT.
- One in four LGBT youth said they had been cyberbullied because of their sexual orientation and one in five said they had experienced this via text message.
- LGBT teenagers who are bullied are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide. About 30 percent of all completed suicides have been related to a gender-identity crisis.

College Cyberbullying Resources

Cyberbullying can be a terrible thing to deal with, and far too many college students experience it on a daily basis. Fortunately, the problem is increasingly recognized on college campuses, and there are resources out there dedicated to stopping it. The following links are excellent places to begin when trying to put a stop to college cyberbullying.

What to Do if You're Being Cyberbullied

"The students need to see the colleges and universities take action to stop cyberbullying when it is occurring," Hall said. "If students know that the school takes it seriously, that it has policies and procedures designed to prevent the behavior, the students will be more likely to report cyberbullying when they see it or when it is happening to them."

Reporting or blocking:

[Facebook Bullying Prevention Hub](#)

This comprehensive section of Facebook geared toward students, parents and educators explains a great deal about online bullying and how to prevent it, including ways to report and block on Facebook.

[FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center](#)

Bullying that includes serious threats should be dealt with appropriately, including a report to the FBI center for Internet crime reporting.

[Information about Cyberbullying Laws](#)

The constantly updated site Cyberbullying Research Center offers information on what can be expected from laws in each state, as well as how those laws might help with reporting, blocking or otherwise stopping the harassment.

[Instagram: Report Bullying](#)

Offensive or inappropriate behavior on Instagram can result in the user being blocked. This link explains how to report these types of problems.

- Stopbullying.com provides a thorough guide to approaching cyberbullying and is offered through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

[Report Cyberbullying: List of Sites and Apps](#)

A plethora of popular apps and social media sites are listed here, along with information on how to report issues with cyberbullying on each.

[Twitter: Reporting Abusive Behavior](#)

Twitter provides a step-by-step guide to reporting abusive or threatening behavior, and multiple Tweets can be packaged within the same report.

On- and Off-Campus Support

On-Campus Support

Campus Security

Harassment and stalking are illegal, which means it's time to get security involved. Take the issues to campus security, with clear details, dates and times of what is happening.

Local Law Enforcement

Sometimes campus security and student services don't have the proper tools to bring charges against those who are exhibiting threatening behavior. Local law enforcement, however, just might be able to help.

Student Services

For students unsure about how to feel safe and secure again, turn to student services with the problem. If they don't have plans in place for assistance, they can certainly guide students to the correct sources.

IT Department

Cyberbullies often hide behind anonymous screen names. The IT department at the college might be able to bypass the layers of security to identify who is truly behind the problem. "When I worked in higher education, there were occasions when our campus security and IT department were able to determine who was behind the cyberbullying even though it was anonymous," Hall said. "Or, there are times when they will be able to ascertain who it is by examining the content of the posts."

Online help & info:

[Campus Safety](#)

This online magazine offers a wealth of information on staying safe at school, including how to fight back against bullying, whether it's in person or online.

[Cyberbullying Research Center](#)

This site offers an enormous amount of information on cyberbullying, designed for those of any age. The center works with popular media organizations and social media sites.

[End to Cyberbullying Organization](#)

This site is dedicated to keeping anyone safe online. Included here are points on prevention, statistics and how to help others.

[How to Remove Stolen Photos Online](#)

This in-depth guide by Who is Hosting This? provides students with an opportunity to remove photos from the Internet that might have fallen into the wrong hands.

[Megan Meier Foundation](#)

Founded in honor of 13-year-old Megan Meier, who took her own life after being bullied online, this site offers information, resources and hope.

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)

When the pressure of cyberbullying becomes too much, reach out to someone here, who can help at any time, day or night. There are resources linked to youth, disaster survivors, Native Americans, veterans, loss survivors, LGBTQ+, suicide attempt survivors and deaf/hearing loss, among others.

[National Youth Advocacy Coalition](#)

This group is dedicated to young people and includes advice, resources and reassurances on a variety of topics that can help students through tough times. The site is formatted in blog post style.

[StaySafeOnline.org](#)

Powered by the National Cyber Security Alliance, this site offers tips on how to stay safe online, especially on social media networks, including information on privacy and what information should or should not be posted online.

[The Trevor Project](#)

This site, founded in 1998 by short-film "Trevor" creators, focuses on crisis intervention and suicide prevention for LGBTQ youth.

What to Do If You're Being Bullied

When a person becomes the target of cyberbullying, they may first be bombarded with questions: Why is this happening to me? Why would this person say horrible things about me? Why am I being attacked like this? Then, when reality sinks in, the victim can feel trapped and alone. It is vitally important to remember that there is recourse for this person's actions. Even if bullies remain anonymous, they can still be caught. Here are ways to take positive steps to make the abuse stop:

Keep the Evidence

As soon as the bullying starts, compile evidence. This can include text messages, emails, screenshots, instant message conversations, IP addresses and anything else that can be acquired. Keep note of dates and times, as well. This will be useful if the cyberbullying escalates or continues because law enforcement will need a record of events.

Talk It Out

Being attacked in any way can be disturbing. Talking about it with someone trusted can help a victim gather courage to stop the behavior.

Block Them

Cyberbullies who can't get in touch with the victims can't do much to hurt them. Block them immediately when the bullying starts. If they create new accounts, block those, too. Warn friends and family to report any behavior they witness, as well.

Go Private

Many social media accounts allow users to go private, which means the user gains control of who sees what is shared online. Keep the profiles private until the bullies back off.

Don't Retaliate

Though it might be tempting to give them a taste of their own medicine, this only opens up the victim up to more problems. Take the high road and ignore them.

Report Their Actions

Many sites will not tolerate bullying. Report the bullies to the site administrators, along with the evidence that has been compiled. Point out the sections of the terms of service that are pertinent.

Contact the School

Campus security or other offices should know about the bullying. Give them as much information as possible, even if the abusers are anonymous.

Contact Law Enforcement

If things escalate, go to local law enforcement and file a formal complaint.

If Someone You Know Is Being Bullied

Most effects of cyberbullying are noticed by those who are not the target. Friends and family might notice the problem when cruel posts begin to appear on social media or observe their loved one becoming withdrawn and nervous when they receive a text or email. Sometimes the bullying is obvious to those who are on message boards and the like, as they will see it happening right before their eyes. Here's what to do when it happens:

Be There

Those who are being cyberbullied often feel hunted or unsure of themselves. Talking to them, inviting them to spend time together and otherwise being a friend can help them feel better about the situation.

Step Up

Tell someone about the cyberbullying. Talk to the friend about why they should not keep quiet about it.

Never Bully Anyone

Never jump into the fray when someone is being bullied; this makes you no better than the rest of them and may be harder to take seriously if things escalate.

Stand Up

Tell the abuser that what they are doing is not okay. Make it perfectly clear, in no uncertain terms. Sometimes being called out on their activity will be enough to make them stop.

How Can You Report Cyberbullying?

Remember that it is important to report cyberbullying, even if the perpetrators are seemingly anonymous. Start right now with these steps, immediately:

- Don't engage with the culprit.
- Make copies of texts, emails, screenshots of message boards and instant messages and anything else that supports the victim's case.
- Block the person who is bullying you.
- Report to the site or app on which the harassment is happening.
- Read the term of service from online providers to determine how to proceed.
- Report the bullying by following the site's procedures
- Report to the school/college/university.
- Send the pertinent information to campus security, student services or other offices that handle cyberbullying. This type of information can usually be found in the student handbook.
- Report even if the perpetrators' identities are unknown.
- Do not notify the bully that he or she is being reported.
- Go to law enforcement.
- If the bullying includes threats, stalking, hate speech or sexually explicit content, it might be a job for law enforcement, as these things may be illegal.
- Research state laws and get in touch with local law enforcement about how to file a complaint.

Tips & Advice from an Expert

Q: It can be tough to know what to do about cyberbullying, especially if the bully is anonymous. What steps can college students take to protect themselves?

A: Even if the cyberbullying is anonymous, students should still report the cyberbullying to a trusted administrator at their college or university. Reporting it to a resident assistant, faculty member, advisor, or better yet, campus security is a really good idea. When I worked in higher

education, there were occasions when our campus security and IT department were able to determine who was behind the cyberbullying even though it was anonymous. Or, there are times when they will be able to ascertain who it is by examining the content of the posts.

Even if they can't determine who the cyberbully is, they can offer the student resources they may need at the time. Most college campuses have access to counseling services and other resources that can help a student understand and deal with cyberbullying. Also, if colleges know that there is cyberbullying occurring on campus, they can take measures to prevent it, which includes educational programming at orientation, or in the residence halls, etc.

Most colleges and universities have some type of disciplinary process or student conduct office, and also have rules against any form of bullying or harassment. If administrators or campus security can locate the cyberbully, they can pursue disciplinary action if the cyberbully is a student; or, if the cyberbully is a non-student, they can help the victim get in touch with local law enforcement or seek other types of interim measures like restraining orders through the courts. Cyberbullying is serious, and sadly, has resulted in students taking their own lives, like Tyler Clementi, Amanda Todd, etc. Colleges and universities understand this and should be proactive if the student reports the behavior.

Q: Some states have initiated legislation that fights against bullying, but what about cyberbullying? Are there any promising court cases or legislation on the horizon?

A: Every state has some form of anti-bullying law or policy, but each state is different, each state defines bullying in different ways, and many of them apply to elementary and secondary schools, not colleges and universities. In many cases, it is the behavior that will be examined and not whether the bullying is occurring in person or through some form of technology. The analysis will be whether the behavior meets the elements defined by the state law or policy. However, some states are being more proactive and actually adding the term cyberbullying or electronic bullying into their laws and policies.

Also, if the cyberbullying is a result of harassment based on a protected class, i.e., race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, etc., then the behavior will constitute a violation of federal law, which all colleges and universities that receive federal funding must comply with. It is important for students to know what their college or university policies are regarding bullying and harassment, and to take some type of action when they see cyberbullying happening. Unfortunately, in many cases, there are other people who know that the cyberbullying is occurring. This is why bystander intervention is so important. If a person knows that someone is the victim of a cyberbully, that person should take some type of action to stop the behavior. Types of action they can take may involve reaching out to the victim, telling a friend or family member, or reporting the cyberbullying to campus safety.

It is important to note that some will take the position that cyberbullying is a form of free speech and to prevent it would be a violation of our constitutional right under the First Amendment. Public colleges and universities have to deal with this argument. Private colleges and universities do not.

Q: What can colleges do to reduce the problem of cyberbullying?

A: Many colleges and universities are grappling with whether they should take steps to ban certain social media apps that allow anonymous posts because of the detrimental impact they have on students. Some have banned certain apps, while others have determined that banning

the apps is not the answer and that the best course of action is preventative programming and education. Programs designed to educate students about what constitutes bullying and the long-lasting impacts it can have on the victims are critical. Bystander intervention programming is also critical. Posters and bulletin boards in the residence halls and in commuter lounges, etc., that are designed to educate and also inform students about where they can go or who they can talk to if they are the victim of cyberbullying is really important.

The students need to see the colleges and universities take action to stop cyberbullying when it is occurring. If students know that the school takes it seriously, that it has policies and procedures designed to prevent the behavior, the students will be more likely to report cyberbullying when they see it or when it is happening to them.

Colleges and universities also have to educate their faculty and staff about the perils of cyberbullying. As hard as it may be to hear about, schools need to talk openly about cases like Tyler Clementi, Jessica Logan, Hope Witsell, etc., so that faculty, staff and students know about the dangerous consequences that can result because of cyberbullying. Schools need to have trained counselors available to talk to faculty, staff and students who may be triggered during educational programming because they too may have been the victim of cyberbullying.

Q: Anything else you might like to add about cyberbullying of college students?

A: Suicide is the most severe consequence of cyberbullying, but there are many other symptoms that can result when a person is the victim of cyberbullying. Victims are at greater risk for depression. They are also more likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs. Therefore, it is critical that college students understand that they do not have to handle cyberbullying alone, and that there are so many people on their campus who can help them, if they just reach out. Students need to be reminded that talking to someone is the first step to making the pain associated with cyberbullying go away.

Source:

Rucker, M., & Hall, C. K. (n.d.). Cyberbullying: Awareness & Prevention in College & Social Media. Retrieved from <https://www.affordablecollegesonline.org/college-resource-center/cyberbullying-awareness/>