



Bullying: 'What Have I Ever Done To You?'

An article by Robert Higgs

When I was being bullied I was given some parental advice: "Just hit them back." One line. So simple. My dad didn't even look up from the TV.

Like all of us who have been bullied I was in a 'victim state' and this advice was useless to me. In the grip of my own fear, ashamed at my own perceived weakness and with a habit of bullying myself, hitting my tormentors was the very last thing I felt capable of. Now some years on I look back at my bullied existence and find it hard to believe it was me. I currently provide anti-bullying training to schools all over the UK and am the author of *'What Have I Ever Done To You?'* (Pegasus Books)-the self-help guide to overcoming bullying.

I've found answers and gained empirical insight into the problems that once overwhelmed me and I wanted to share some of them with you!

People always ask me "What's the worst thing about being bullied?" Their eyes probe for teary-eyed confessions of bruises, threats and the smack of punches landing on your face. But what is the worst thing? Is it the bottled up anger that leads to social paralysis, leaving you shy and withdrawn from the world? Is it the paranoia that makes you see a threat in everyone you meet and makes you hear insults in every word spoken? No. The worst thing is that lonely feeling just after it's happened. That realization deep inside that even the fear and the shame can't smother. You know you should do something about it but you don't know what.

It's the lack of an answer that plagues you as bullying takes over your every waking moment and invades your dreams at night. A single instruction to fight back doesn't hold water in a bully/victim relationship that is thriving on your own fear. Then there's the questions you always ask yourself- 'why me?' you scream inside every time they shoot words at you like bullets. 'Where's my smile gone?' you say as you look in the mirror and see a person you no longer recognize staring holes in you.

And with every day that slips by in apathy you sink a little lower like a tent peg being bashed into the ground. The insults become your thoughts and lead to a 'victim state' that endures through life until you swap passivity for hard earned confidence with strong roots.

And in truth the bullies aren't important, they're just predators trying to add a little strength to their insecurity by feeding off you. But the seemingly all-powerful bully soon disappears when you develop yourself internally and start changing thoughts that belittle into thoughts that build you up. Bullies and victims attract each other. When you kill the victim inside, you kill the attraction too.

Before I thought the worst thing about bullying was seeing it as a permanent problem. Now I know different- all things pass in time. All the quicker if you yourself make it so.

But how do you do this?

Here are ten steps to follow:

Step 1: Admit the problem to yourself. If you don't acknowledge bullying and live in denial you cannot move beyond it.

Step 2: Tell someone else. Bullying thrives on silence. Tell everyone you know you are being bullied. Break the code of secrecy that binds you invisibly to the bully. When friends and family

know about the problem they are in a position to help and support you.

Step 3: Find your breaking point. We all have one with regards bullying. Don't repress your anger, push it through to the point where you decide 'enough is enough.'

Step 4: As a 'victim' you've been playing a role. It's learned behavior. The positive thing about that is you can unlearn it. Be honest with yourself. Write down the fears that are keeping you a victim. Bullies are just mirror images of the fears we all have inside. Whether it's a fear of verbal or physical confrontation, a fear of looking weak or of making the problem worse write it down.

Step 5: Commit yourself to confronting the fear. Do this in small steps. My own fears were of physical and verbal confrontation. I pushed myself to take a job that required me to speak to the public constantly in a 40-hour week and took up boxing training, eventually taking the step of sparring in the ring. The confidence I grew changed my life beyond measure and the bullies disappeared. They no longer had a target.

Step 6: Confront your shame. It's a natural feeling if you're being bullied but don't continue to succumb to it. You are not alone but rather one of millions who are bullied in schools, workplaces and homes. Bullies are the people who should be ashamed. Don't make their job easier for them by feeling this way.

Step 7: Overcome the self-bullying habit. We all have an inner voice in our heads that reads our thoughts to us. Pay constant attention to it. As a 'victim' the voice tends to repeat the bullies insults and threats and attaches to thoughts that destroy your self-image. Try this self-talk technique: When you hear the voice talking negatively shout STOP in your head. You will cut the voice off mid sentence. Then replace the words with a positive statement about yourself.

Step 8: Develop a defense against any possible bullying attack. If the bullying is physical you could enroll in a self-protection class. If the bullying is verbal try this verbal technique. When attacked with words practice saying a short, assertive statement back. For example, 'You could be right' or smile and say 'thanks very much.' Bullying is about intention. The bully wants one thing from you: A distressed reaction. Ending the bullying is all about training yourself not to give the bully the reaction they want.

Step 9: Use 'I' statements when talking to yourself and others. For example: 'I' am doing really well. 'I' like my new clothes. 'I' am a great person. These are all effective because they project confidence and they do not lead you into a slanging match with a bully. Never ask a bully for approval. Withholding validation is one-way bullies maintain power. A bully will never give you approval because they would lose their power. That's why with a bully you feel you can never do anything right. It's the bullies way of keeping their victim.

Step 10: Develop a new attitude. Life is full of opportunity and is too short to live a bullied existence. Make the development of confidence your ongoing goal and put a stop to the bullying in your life. Good luck!