

Study examines long-term emotional impacts of school bullying among girls

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College-age women who were bullied in middle or high school continue to feel a range of negative emotions, including anxiety and lack of self-confidence, years after their experiences. But according to a new study

from researchers at the University of Maine, some are also able to find positive gains and growth, as they feel pride at overcoming being bullied and moving forward with their lives as young adults.

Researchers have long recognized that school bullying leads to feelings of anxiety, depression, loneliness and fear in victims, as well as other outcomes ranging from avoiding certain activities and situations to suicide. These [negative impacts](#) can linger into adulthood, affecting the mental and [physical health](#), economic standing and social lives of those who have been bullied.

The UMaine study was conducted by Katelyn Smith, who earned her bachelor's degree from the university in 2017, and professor of family relations and human sexuality Sandra Caron. They sought a deeper understanding of the long-term impact of school bullying on [girls](#) by asking a dozen college-age women who had been bullied in middle and/or high school to describe the bullying behaviors they experienced, how it affected them at the time, and the ongoing impact it has had on their college experience.

The most common type of bullying, which all participants in the study reported experiencing, was verbal bullying, such as "name-calling, spreading rumors, and being threatened."

"When I was in [high school](#), one of the girls who would bully me said, 'You could jump off a bridge and die and no one would care,'" reported one of the victims.

Half of the women also reported physical attacks.

"I dreaded getting on the bus to go home from school," said one participant. "The same girl would sit behind me on purpose, and she would spit in my hair... or she would throw trash at me out of the bus

window as I was boarding the bus."

Other experiences included being excluded from social or group activities, and cyberbullying.

In addition to the [negative emotions](#) experienced at the time, the researchers asked about how the school bullying continued to impact victims as [college students](#).

"In the first few months of starting college, I didn't talk to anyone or try to make friends," said one former victim. "Being myself was a big issue for me because I had been bullied for being myself for so many years. I kept to myself because of fear of being judged."

However, 10 of the women reflected that they had come a long way since being bullied, and eight of them reported "turning the bullying experience into a positive" by being nicer and more accepting of others.

"I currently attend group counseling, and this has helped me a lot," said one of the participants. "It's taken me three years, but I feel like I am stronger and more confident now."

All of the women who participated in the study discussed what can be done to prevent [school bullying](#). Ideas ranged from improving training for students and staff at schools to monitoring students who frequently miss [school](#) to making sure parents are aware of what their children are doing on the internet and talking to their children about bullying.

The study appears in the journal *Current Psychology*.

More information: Katelyn F. Smith et al, Exploring the experiences and impact of middle school and high school bullying: A qualitative analysis of interviews with college women, *Current Psychology* (2022).

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