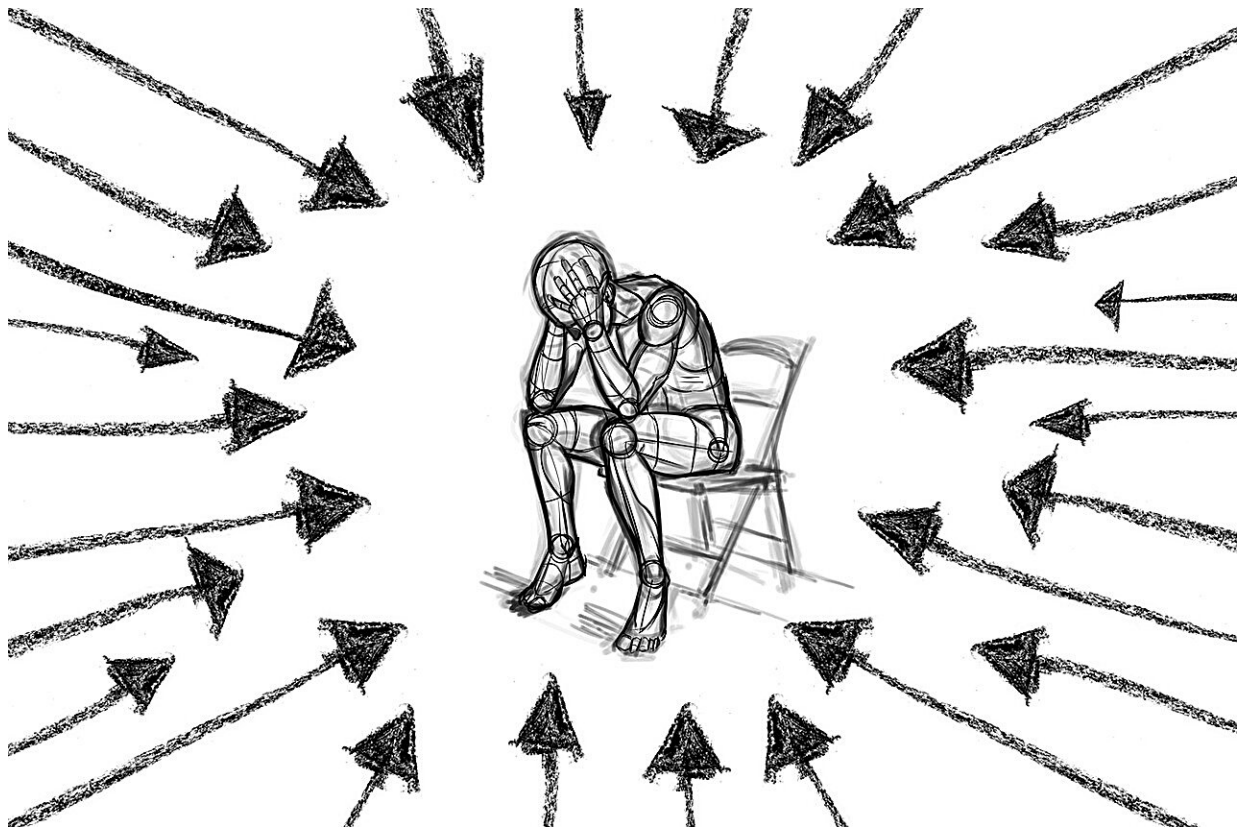


Q&A: The impact of childhood bullying on adult mental health

October 3 2023, by Antonella Di Marzio



Credit: Geralt/Pixabay

During National Bullying Prevention Month, it must be acknowledged that the impact of bullying extends well beyond childhood. Adults who were bullied as children may be at greater risk for depressive outcomes.

But what are the mechanisms that help carry this risk forward? Two assistant professors from the William & Mary psychological sciences department, Madelyn Labella and Adrian Bravo, investigated common responses to stress as potential links in the chain. Their [cross-cultural study](#), co-authored with international researchers and former W&M students, has been published in the journal *Aggressive Behavior*.

Labella and Bravo discuss how their findings could influence future interventions and address a common coping strategy called rumination—that is, repetitive thinking about [negative feelings](#) and their causes or consequences. While they say that stomping out bullying should be a primary target, adequate resilience-promoting strategies can help alleviate mental health outcomes for people who keep experiencing bullying victimization to this day.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Many definitions of bullying exist. Which is one you agree on and have used in your research?

Labella: Bullying is a chronic pattern of aggression —not necessarily physical, but also verbal and psychological. It is often characterized by a power imbalance, where the person who is bullying has more social power than the person who is being victimized.

Bravo: We also assessed childhood bullying experiences using [a measure](#) developed by the World Health Organization. According to the WHO, bullying occurs when a young person or group of young people say or do bad and unpleasant things to another person, when a young person is teased a lot in an unpleasant way or is left out of things.

Q: How can your findings influence interventions?

Labella: If we were to confirm our findings using [longitudinal studies](#), then strategies like [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) might be useful to help people who experience bullying desist from rumination. CBT includes behavioral activation strategies having people doing things they enjoy so that they can take their mind off difficult experiences.

I also think that mindfulness-based interventions have a lot of promise. People who are able to mindfully accept their thoughts and feelings—without holding on to them, without judging them, and let them go—might be able to choose to live in ways that fit their own values and goals even in the midst of stressors like bullying.

Q: Are there any popular coping strategies that may be counterproductive?

Labella: Seeking social support is a really common coping strategy that can be incredibly effective and helpful. However, it can sometimes shade into co-rumination, which is when friends are reflecting each other's negative moods and thoughts back, and they're all getting stuck in a spiral instead of being able to talk through a stressor and move on. There's evidence that this pattern tends to happen more often in friendship between girls, and this might be part of the reason for gender differences in depression risk starting in adolescence.

Bravo: Ruminating is a maladaptive strategy, as demonstrated by Susan Nolen-Hoeksema's Response Styles Theory, which we recently addressed in my Research Personality class. One of the points is that it impairs [problem solving](#).

To deal with ruminative thinking and stop feeling bad about being bullied, a lot of adolescents may turn to substance use. The problem is that it doesn't actually solve the problem, and you have now a second

problem.

The question is, how can we intervene? Ideally, we would stop bullying, that should be the number one goal. But unfortunately, these are real things that happen to individuals. And we need to provide strategies to help them deal with processing, which I think is where rumination comes in, but then comes the coping part, dealing with stress and improving distress tolerance.

Q: Bullying is often portrayed as an unavoidable part of growing up. Are there any other common myths about bullying?

Labella: There definitely is an impression that bullying is part of a common developmental phase, but even the results of this study show that it's not inevitable. Half of our sample didn't report experiences of bullying at all during their childhood years. Moving toward increasing that number is a valuable goal, as experiencing bullying can in many cases shape social and emotional development across the lifespan.

Bravo: Especially [older generations](#) have a misperception that cyberbullying can be stopped just by turning off the internet, but the truth is that bullying can now happen anytime, not just during school hours. It is not time-sensitive anymore, and it can be really pervasive.

Q: Rates of physical bullying were consistently low in every country that you examined, while appearance-based bullying was consistently high. Can you elaborate on this?

Labella: There is greater awareness that physical bullying is not the only

kind, that you can have these emotionally and psychologically taxing experiences, like being excluded, being mocked for how you look or for your racial and ethnic background. At the same time, I think these experiences are still viewed as somewhat more socially acceptable than physical aggression, so they are more likely to happen to people.

Bravo: Physical bullying implies that you have the strength to be physical, but other forms imply that anyone can be a bully or a victim.

Due to social media and more access to information, now more than ever children are internalizing standards that may be more out of reach than in the past. We really need bullying prevention initiatives and campaigns to be multifaceted and focus on schools as well as media, especially online media.

Also, [social media](#) content that puts other people down is popular, receives exposure, and this could play a role not only in how bullying is being processed but also in what is seen as acceptable.

Q: Can you expand on the cross-cultural aspect of your research?

Bravo: We have found the four facets of rumination to be consistent across countries, so it seems to be more of a universal phenomenon. To what extent bullying actually leads to distressful events may differ based on the social norms dictated by the culture you live in.

Diving into more unique environmental/social norms within each of these cultures will play a big role. In our data set, for example, Spain reported the lowest rates of bullying victimization: We are trying to identify reasons, and it may relate to how people depend on each other in collectivistic cultures, with bullying being seen as something very against

the norms that reflects poorly on everyone else.

Emotion regulation and how you deal with emotions is definitely not universal and varies across cultures. Even though we didn't see it as a mediator in our study, it could be a moderator. Further, social support is really protective, and it may look different in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. There has been a lot of research into how both kinds of cultures receive and express [social support](#): This may be helpful when dealing with young individuals experiencing chronic victimization.

Labella: The fact that bullying had similar associations with depression across cultures is important: It suggests that it is still associated with risky outcomes in young adulthood even where it is culturally more common. Being common doesn't make it OK.

More information: Madelyn H. Labella et al, Childhood bullying victimization, emotion regulation, rumination, distress tolerance, and depressive symptoms: A cross-national examination among young adults in seven countries, *Aggressive Behavior* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/ab.22111](https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.22111)

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