

Article 5

Empowering Cyberbullied Youth: A Solution-Focused Adlerian Counseling Model

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is a growing concern due to enhanced use of social media and other forms of technology. Anonymity offers an opportunity for youth to bully others without being seen. The consequences of such actions can be devastating for victims, resulting in the need for counseling programs in order to address the issue. Within this article, background information on cyberbullying including prevalence, definition, consequences, gender and cultural differences, types, and risk factors precedes details of a four session counseling program. The model infuses art, solution-focused brief therapy, and Adlerian techniques into a session that empowers the cyberbullying victim.

Keywords: cyberbullying, solution-focused, social interest

Up to 25% of youth in middle and high school reported being bullied online at some point in their lifetime with 9% indicating the bullying occurred within the past 30 days (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2014). This is especially concerning given the severe consequences experienced by victims of cyberbullying. Many students experience

lowered academic achievement and self-esteem, hopelessness, withdrawal, depression, and even attempted or completed suicide due to bullying that occurs via technology (Froeschle, Crews, & Li, 2011; Strom & Strom, 2005; Willard, 2006). These consequences affect the victim's entire family system (Froeschle et al., 2011). As a result, counselors need theoretically-based methods to empower these youth and their families. Following is a definition of cyberbullying, information on gender and cultural differences, types of cyberbullying, and risk factors to aid counselors as they determine ways to empower victimized youth and families.

Definition and Description of Cyberbullying

According to the Patchin (2013), "Cyberbullying is when someone repeatedly harasses, mistreats, or makes fun of another person online or while using cell phones or other electronic devices" (p. 1). Examples of cyberbullying might include spreading rumors via social media, sending hurtful text messages, creating fake and damaging profiles on social networking sites, or posting humiliating images online (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

Cyberbullying is more damaging than traditional bullying for many reasons. First, because cyberbullying occurs via technology, it allows the bully to remain anonymous. This anonymity may decrease empathy since the perpetrator does not have to face the victim. It further empowers the bully, who may feel there will be no consequences despite behavior severity (Froeschle, Castillo, Mayorga, & Hargrave, 2008). Second, technology allows bullying to reach inside a youth's home at all times of day and allows harmful material to be spread worldwide in a matter of seconds. Finally, damage from cyberbullying may never be fully repaired. Information posted online can be impossible to retract even years later leaving the victim to suffer forever (Froeschle et al., 2008; U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Needless to say, victims suffer many consequences that require intervention.

Consequences

The consequences of cyberbullying can be severe. Students exhibit symptoms ranging from negative school behaviors to somatic, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Negative school behaviors include issues such as lowered academic achievement and truancy. Further, students who are cyberbullied face additional stress since they are more apt to be bullied in the face-to-face school setting (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Somatic and mental health issues include such things as physical health issues, lowered self-esteem, hopelessness, withdrawal, depression, substance abuse, and attempted or completed suicide (Froeschle et al., 2011; Strom & Strom, 2005; Willard, 2006).

Gender and Cultural Differences

More research is needed to determine racial and ethnic differences in cyberbullying. Hinduja and Patchin (2015) suggested that all races and ethnicities are equally vulnerable to cyberbullying, victimization, and offending. White students reported lifetime cyberbullying victimization more frequently than others, yet no differences were evident when looking at traditional bullying. Counselors must,

therefore, consider cyberbullying as a possible issue when dealing with mental health and academic issues for all students.

While evidence is inconclusive on whether males or females are victimized more frequently through cyberbullying, research does offer some insight. Adolescent girls reported having been victimized more frequently throughout their lifetimes than boys (25% versus 16%), yet no gender differences existed when analyzing data of incidents that occurred within the past 30 days (Patchin, 2013). This might indicate that girls experience cyberbullying at younger ages than boys.

Results are also mixed as to whether girls or boys bully others more frequently (Heretick, 2012). Patchin (2013) contended that girls participate more frequently in relational aggression and cyberbullying behavior. Mason (2008) came to the opposite conclusion and reported that males more frequently self-reported cyberbullying than did females. Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, and Daciuk (2011), contended that females are more likely than males to be both bullies and victims.

Despite the need for additional research in order to arrive at definite conclusions based on gender, it does seem that each gender may participate in different types of bullying. For example, Hinduja and Patchin (2015) reported that girls covertly spread rumors while boys were more apt to bully one another through online gaming. Following is a description of these and other types of cyberbullying.

Types of Cyberbullying

The literature distinguishes different forms of cyberbullying experienced by youth. Feinberg and Robey (2008), Hinduja and Patchin (2015), and The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2014) discussed several distinct types of cyberbullying used to victimize others. These include: stalking, making threats, harassment, impersonation, humiliation, trickery, exclusion, flaming, happy-slapping, photoshopping, and denigration. Each type is described as follows.

Harassment, threats, and stalking are related yet distinct forms of cyberbullying. For example, harassment occurs when a person repeatedly sends offensive messages to a victim (Feinberg & Robey, 2008). Flaming, a form of harassment, is evidenced when perpetrators send angry, rude, and offensive messages that include such things as yelling or cursing via electronic media (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2014) whereas threats take harassment a step further by conveying possible physical harm to a victim (Feinberg & Robey, 2008, Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2014). Despite the apparent abuse inflicted through harassment or threats, however, stalking is the most involved. This is due to the fact that stalking involves a combination of threats, harassment, denigration, and other types of cyberbullying (Feinberg & Robey, 2008). Stalking is illegal in some states and law enforcement may be able to offer assistance to victims in some cases.

Other forms of cyberbullying involve deceit and misrepresentation. For example, trickery occurs when a victim shares private information and the perpetrator shares the information publicly (Feinberg & Robey, 2008). Impersonation, on the other hand, is defined as misrepresentation of identification that allows the bully to post damaging information about the victim. Bullies often impersonate victims by creating fictitious social media pages (Feinberg & Robey, 2008).

Photographs, videos, and Web sites are also used as tools to cyber-bully. Humiliation is the term used when pictures or information are posted online in order to embarrass the victim. Bullies have been known to photoshop and post pictures where victims are seen in an embarrassing way (e.g., nude, performing strange behaviors, in the role of movie characters, etc.; Feinberg & Robey, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2014). The term happy-slapping is the form of humiliation referred to when actual victimization is recorded live and posted online (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2014). Denigration is the term used when Web sites are the tool used for humiliation. For example, students may set up sites where others vote on a person's negative features (Feinberg & Robey, 2008).

Finally, many bullies capitalize on adolescents' inherent need for identity and sense of self by excluding them from social interactions (Erikson, 1968). The term used for this form of cyberbullying is exclusion. Exclusion is intentionally leaving someone out of an online conversation or group (Feinberg & Robey, 2008).

Each aforementioned form of cyberbullying offers the bully anonymity and, therefore, additional power over the victim. This can result in more opportunity for victim harm (Froeschle et al., 2011; Froeschle et al., 2008). As a result, it is important for counselors to understand victim risk factors so help can be given as soon as possible.

Risk Factors

Several commonalities exist among cyberbullying victims. High Internet use; sharing passwords; reduced face-to-face interactions and the accompanying social and non-verbal cues; and communicating with those met online have been touted as risk factors for victims of cyberbullying (Ang & Goh, 2010; Mishna et al., 2011; Slovak & Singer, 2011; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). Mishna et al. (2011) found that being a victim of bullying at school increased the probability of being bullied online. This is especially concerning since students who were physically victimized at school were also more likely to be cyber-bullies (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Consequently, many students are both bullies and victims.

Children who both bully and are victimized suffer more peer rejection and adjustment problems than other youth (Mishna et al., 2011; Pellegrini, 1998). Mishna et al. (2011) found that most students reporting involvement in cyberbullying also reported involvement in verbal and physical aggression at school. As a result, cyberbullying may be an opportunity for typical school bullying to extend beyond the school day and into the home.

Theoretical Background

Individual Psychology

In the early 1900s, Alfred Adler broke away from Freud's psychoanalysis and created individual psychology (Cherry, 2014). Individual psychology's premise is that people can overcome inferiority by giving back to society, a notion he called social interest. In other words, focusing on the welfare of others helps the individual improve

self-worth, self-assurance, and overall mental health (North American Society of Adlerian Psychology, 2011).

Dreikurs was a student of Adler who believed all behaviors served a purpose. His experience working with children caused him to expand Adler's theory and add the mistaken goals of revenge, power, attention, and inadequacy (Shulman & Dreikurs, 1978). Dreikurs believed youth met their need for revenge, power, attention, and inadequacy by acting in inappropriate ways. By teaching youth to behave differently, Dreikurs believed these needs could be met in socially acceptable and mentally healthy ways (Shulman & Dreikurs, 1978). Froeschle and Riney (2008) suggested utilizing Dreikur's mistaken goals when counseling students exhibiting social aggression and bullying. By teaching alternative behaviors including social interest, they contended students can find more appropriate methods of fulfillment in lieu of bullying.

Kottman (2003) utilized an Adlerian based premise called the Crucial C's in play therapy. Kottman stated that children need to feel they are capable and connected, that they count, and that they have courage. Kottman contended these Crucial C's help children become mentally healthy and decrease troublesome behaviors. She further suggested counselors track acquisition of the Crucial C's including self-perceptions in numerous settings. For this reason, the following program uses the Crucial C's to track positive thought processes in a variety of settings, reduce the chance that victims become perpetrators, and decrease self-defeating behaviors.

Person-Centered Therapy

Carl Rogers believed each person possesses the skills and abilities needed to solve their own problems (Rogers, 1961). Through empathy, reflecting a person's feelings, and mirroring client thoughts via paraphrasing, Rogers believed a client would feel the acceptance needed to make change. According to Rogers, offering genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard made the counselor a medium for the client's personal growth.

These aforementioned core conditions (genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard) may be especially important when counseling victims of cyberbullying. Hinduja and Patchin (2015) stated that up to 60% of cyberbullying victims are harassed by someone within their own social circle. As a result, the victim's trust and rapport may have been violated by the perpetrator and as such, special attention, as inherent in Roger's (1961) core conditions, may need to be paid in the establishment of the counselor/client relationship.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

Solution-focused brief therapy, as created by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, emerged in the 1980s (Davis & Osborn, 2000). The theory is based on the premise that individuals hold the keys to self-improvement (de Shazer, 1988). Several techniques such as complimenting, exception questions, the miracle question, and feedback are used in the theory to assist individuals as they overcome problems. Complimenting emphasizes a person's strengths and increases self-concept and self-efficacy while exception questions help focus on things that have worked in the past. The miracle question helps youth focus on the real issues that need improvement by asking how things would be different if life was perfect (DeJong & Berg, 2002). Feedback is given in

solution-focused brief therapy using a three-step process. The first step requires the counselor to compliment the client. The second step, or bridge, agrees with needed change. The third step asks the youth to complete a needed task (DeJong & Berg, 2002).

Solution-focused brief therapy techniques are especially important when working with cyberbullying victims (Froeschle & Crews, in press). For example, complimenting can be used to point out strengths that help overcome the bullied youth's feelings of defeat, insecurity, and fear. Further, the miracle question helps focus cyberbullying victims on positive life possibilities in lieu of typical thoughts of loneliness, and hopelessness (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Feedback is a catalyst that can lead to better locus of control.

Solution-Focused Adlerian Counseling

The literature gives credence to integrating Solution-Focused and Adlerian techniques (including Kottman's Crucial C's and Dreikur's mistaken goals) when working with adolescents who have been bullied. Froeschle and Crews (in press) contended that a combination of solution-focused and Adlerian techniques is a theoretically based and practical method for assisting cyberbullying victims in clinical mental health settings. Further, Froeschle and Riney (2008) detail an efficacious program where art, Adlerian techniques, and Dreikur's mistaken goals integrate to create a useful program for bullied students in the school setting. A detailed description of the program follows in the next section.

The Solution-Focused Adlerian Counseling Program

Program Rationale

The Solution-Focused Adlerian Counseling Program consists of four sessions. The first session in the Solution-Focused Adlerian Counseling Program consists of non-structured rapport building, and the second session is divided into four structured phases. These phases include: 1) Identifying and Expressing Emotions, 2) Synthesizing Feelings and Experiences and Educating about Mistaken Goals, 3) Instilling Coping Strategies and Exceptions, and 4) Offering Feedback. Solution-focused brief therapy (de Shazer, 1988), person-centered counseling (Rogers, 1961), and Individual Psychology (Adler, 1964) create the foundation for each sessions. Each section is described based on the imbedded theoretical components along with a rationale for inclusion. Sessions three and four include parents as part of an educational process.

The first session is entitled Building Rapport. Time is taken to get acquainted so victims who may be withdrawn and exhibit little trust have an opportunity to establish rapport with the counselor. Roger's (1961) techniques such as paraphrasing and reflecting feelings as well as core conditions (genuineness, empathy, unconditional positive regard) are used in a non-directive manner in this session to help victims who often feel hopeless, withdrawn, and depressed and suffer from lowered self-esteem (Strom & Strom, 2005; Willard, 2006) and mistrust (Froeschle et al., 2008). Trust and rapport are especially important since victimized students rarely confide in adults (Froeschle et al., 2008).

Session two begins with a combination of Rogerian and solution-focused techniques. During the first phase of session two, complimenting is used to build on client strengths. This complimenting helps cyberbullying victims internalize personal

traits that enable future success (De Jong & Berg, 2002). Recognizing these strengths becomes the first step students experience toward controlling personal destiny. This is especially important since victims of cyberbullying often feel helpless. Complimenting's accompanying sense of control assists cyberbullying victims in overcoming opposite feelings of helplessness.

Exception questions are also used in the first phase of session two to offer the student an opportunity to recognize times where problems were overcome successfully (De Jong & Berg, 2002). As a result, these exception questions further build a sense of self-control and begin to counter depression with proof that success is possible. Upon successful completion of phase one, cyberbullying victims begin to overcome helplessness and withdrawal, improve self-esteem and feelings of depression by building rapport, recognizing personal strengths, and believing that improvement is possible.

The second phase in the second session is noted when cyberbullying victims begin to identify and express emotions. During this phase, students are asked the miracle question (as used in solution-focused brief therapy) and begin to match personal feelings with colors. The miracle question is used to help victims prioritize desires and goals. Once the true feelings and desires are shared, colors are used to help students describe and understand personal feelings.

The third phase in the second session helps students synthesize feelings and experiences and become educated about mistaken goals. Dreikur's mistaken goals are connected to personal feelings during this phase. These connections help students recognize ways they are unintentionally contributing to the problem. Once these mistaken goals are revealed, students can be educated so better goals are formulated. Solution-focused techniques expand on this education. For example, exception questions offer successful methods of problem reduction during times when mistaken goals were not used. Complimenting continues during this phase and reinforces the ability to succeed without use of mistaken goals. Kottman's Crucial C's are utilized to reinforce positive methods of overcoming negative feelings and to further compliment students.

During phase four of session two, students devise coping strategies and further explore exceptions in this area. Depressed and helpless victims need strategies to deal with short-term and long-term feelings. Solution-focused exception questions are used in order to determine coping mechanisms that work in the spur of the moment as well as long term.

The final phase in the second session utilizes feedback to help students move from talk to action. Solution-Focused feedback is given through: 1) an initial compliment outlining overall strengths, 2) a bridge that reinforces a feeling of connectedness and rapport, and 3) specific tasks (De Jong & Berg, 2002). Specific tasks include the Adlerian "as if" technique. By pretending everything is going well on a specific day, students realize they are in control of their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. A second task consists of formulating an Adlerian social interest activity. Social interest offers a way whereby victims can overcome helplessness, depression, and self-esteem issues by giving back to others experiencing similar problems (Adler, 1964).

In sessions three and four, parents and families are invited to attend sessions. During these sessions, parents and families are educated about Internet safety and shown strategies to reduce the fear of technology that often accompanies cyberbullying (Froeschle et al., 2011). In addition, families are educated about stages of grief so they

understand the grieving process and can, therefore, help the victim navigate the process. Relaxation techniques help parents and victims manage emotions that coincide with victimization.

Program Description

Session Format. The following section includes sufficient details to aid with program implementation. The first session begins by building rapport. Upon entering the room, the counselor might begin building rapport by saying, “Your mom seemed very concerned and wanted me to visit with you. Tell me your perspective on why you are here.” Time is taken to build rapport and get acquainted. A non-directive Rogerian approach using empathy, reflection of feelings, and paraphrasing helps build a connection between the counselor and client. As a result, structured sessions do not begin until the second session.

During session two, the counselor implements a structured counseling session by first using compliments, paraphrasing, and reflection of feelings. For example, the counselor might compliment by saying, “Thank you for sharing this with me. It takes courage to talk about this. Tell me more about this problem.” The counselor actively listens, paraphrases, and reflects feelings. For example, the counselor might say, “You feel hopeless and left out because they made fun of you online” in response to the student’s story. Since academic problems are frequent consequences for cyberbullying victims, they may mention they are skipping school or failing courses. The counselor uses exception questions to address this and might state, “Tell me about a time when you were passing and attending school.” The counselor continues to paraphrase and compliment until focus on the true issue becomes clear and can be addressed.

At this time, students move into Phase Two, Identification and Expression of Emotions. A typical scenario might be as follows. The counselor asks the miracle question, “If a miracle happened and all your problems disappeared, what would be different?” The student might respond, “Those girls would not say mean things to me online and I wouldn’t be picked on by those who saw it at school.” The counselor might then say, “How would you be different if they hadn’t said this to you?” The student then says, “I wouldn’t be sad all the time and mad.” “It sounds like you have many feelings about this at home and at school.” The counselor then brings out a marker, an ink pen, three separate sheets of paper labeled “Home,” “School,” or “Online.” The counselor says, “Choose a color (marker) that represents how you feel at school. Mark it on the paper and label it with the emotion.” This continues until all emotions felt at school have been identified by color. Next, the counselor says, “Choose a color that represents how you feel at home. Mark it on the paper and label it.” Again, all emotions felt at home are identified by color. Finally, the counselor states, “Choose a color that represents how you feel online. Mark it on the paper and label it.” Once all emotions have been labeled, the victim describes these feelings and how they have coped with the feelings thus far.

Phase Three, Synthesizing Feelings and Experiences and Educating About Mistaken Goals, requires the use of four notebook cards each containing one word from the following list: Power, Revenge, Attention, and Inadequacy. The counselor states, “Read the words on the four cards (Power, Revenge, Attention, Inadequacy). Define these words.” After students are educated on the meaning of the words, the counselor says, “Match the feelings (colors) you identified earlier today to these four words. Draw

the color representing each feeling on these cards and label the feeling just like you did on the sheets where you described your feelings at home, school, and online.” Feelings and mistaken goals are addressed based on previous feelings and coping methods. Next the counselor says, “Draw a picture of a time you had these feelings (Power, Revenge, Attention, and Inadequacy) but did not let them bother you.” The drawing is discussed along with other exceptions identified in lieu of using mistaken goals.

Next, focus is placed on replacing mistaken goals with the more positive Crucial C’s. The counselor says, “Now read the words on four additional cards (courage, count, capable, connected). Place the cards that go together by saying this, “If I am capable, then I don’t need to feel inadequate. If I count, I don’t need power. If I am connected, I don’t need attention, and if I have courage I don’t need revenge.” Students repeat these messages and each is discussed. The counselor then says, “So it sounds like if you feel capable, connected, courageous, and like you count, these other feelings (mistaken goals) won’t be as important.” At this point, students typically say, “Yes, but I don’t feel that way because of what happened.” The counselor responds with, “You don’t think it is possible to feel capable, connected, courageous, and like you count. At the same time, you have shown each of these by your own actions today.” The student says, “What do you mean?” The counselor states compliments using each Crucial C such as:

- 1) Courageous—You showed up here today and told me what was going on. That takes courage.
- 2) Connected—Despite everything, you still care about your mom and she cares enough about you to bring you here.
- 3) Count—Your teachers thought you mattered enough to contact your mom. To them, you count.
- 4) Capable—You drew a picture showing that you were able to avoid feeling the negative feelings in the past. This means you are very capable.

The counselor then says, “What does this say about the kids who say mean things about you?” “Yes, the kids who say this are wrong about you!”

Phase Four moves into addressing coping strategies and exceptions. The counselor begins this phase by saying, “You drew a picture earlier telling me how you avoided these negative feelings. Can you think of other things you have done/are doing that have helped you get through this?” The counselor and student generate a list for both long-term and immediate assistance. This list might include: drawing, journaling, playing with pets, exercising, helping younger kids going through similar experiences, and numerous other personal coping strategies.

Finally, feedback is given to assist the student. The counselor states, “You are a very courageous and capable girl (complimenting). I agree that you need to feel better about going to school so you are content to be there (bridge). I also think you can learn ways to make it less likely for kids to harm you online. I think your ideas of (list) are good and you should use them this week when you can. I especially like your idea about helping younger kids and I hope you will put some thought into how this might happen. I also think we could work on some other strategies like this to help you feel better over the next few weeks (tasks). Does this sound good to you?” After the student’s response, the counselor continues with, “I am also wondering if you would like to try something odd over this next week. I want you to go to school and no matter what happens, act as if everything is going well. Then next week tell me what happens.”

In session three, parents and families are invited to attend the session. During this session, parents and families are educated about Internet safety and strategies to reduce fear of technology that often accompanies cyberbullying (Froeschle et al., 2011). For example, parents are introduced to social media pages and the accompanying privacy concerns. Parents are taught how to create social media pages so they are familiar with the culture and can monitor their child's Internet sessions. Finally, parents are asked to leave and a discussion ensues between the counselor and victim regarding outcome of the previous assignment. If the client pretended all was well even when things were bad, the counselor would ask, "What happened when you pretended everything was going well?" The client might state, "Nothing really happened but I pretended like you asked." The counselor would say, "Tell me what went well for you that day." The client would list all positive things that occurred arriving at the conclusion that their behavior controlled many of the negative personal thoughts experienced. The session ends with a discussion on possible social interest activities the client might pursue.

During session four, families are educated about stages of grief that may occur as the victim feels a loss of status, a sense of self, and friendships (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). These grieving stages consist of 1) denial, 2) anger, 3) bargaining, 4) depression, and 5) acceptance (Axelrod, 2014). Parents are taught that denial is a temporary grieving mechanism that may eventually be replaced with anger and bargaining. They are also introduced to relaxation techniques that help reduce tensions while the family endures the youth's grieving process. Parents can also learn solution-focused complimenting techniques that are useful in efforts to empower the adolescent during the bargaining stage as well as when grief moves into the depression stage. Kind words can be powerful in alleviating the overwhelming sense of doom and loss of self often faced by victims (Axelrod, 2014). Most importantly, families are reassured that acceptance is the final grieving stage and is accompanied by better victim coping. Finally, the entire family is encouraged to participate in a social interest activity that encourages the Crucial C's and therefore, improved mental health.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is an issue faced by a growing number of students and must be addressed by counselors. Utilizing a program based on solution-focused brief therapy and Adlerian techniques can help students overcome feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and lowered self-esteem. Rogerian techniques begin the process by building trust and rapport while social interest, complimenting, and exception techniques empower victims and create feelings of control. Counselors who utilize programs such as the one described in this article can help victims cope with negative feelings, use positive strategies rather than mistaken goals, and feel more in control of the situation.

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