Cyberbullying: The mental health impact and strategies

Cyberbullying can have far-reaching and significant effects on mental health

MINDTALK

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THE findings from the Adolescents Health Survey 2022 by the National Institute of Health and the Ministry of Health (MoH) have certainly alarmed us about the importance of cyberbullying issues among adolescents in Malaysia.

The survey reported that one in five adolescents admitted to bullying and harassing somebody through the internet, cell phones, or other electronic devices. males being at higher risk of such behaviour. Among the common cyberbullying activities occurring are making rude comments online, spreading rumours, and sending or posting embarrassing photos of others online. With almost all adolescents being frequent users of the internet and electronic gadgets, cyberbullying will certainly be a potential ongoing risk to this population.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF BULLYING ONLINE

Despite the lack of a universally recognised definition, most definitions of cyberbullying are based on the more widely recognised definition of traditional bullying, which is characterised as persistent acts of aggression characterised by a power imbalance between the aggressor and their targets. According to Tokunaga (2010), cyberbullying is any conduct in which people or groups use electronic or digital media to frequently spread hostile or aggressive messages meant to cause discomfort or harm to others.

Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying entails a more severe invasion of personal space. This is made worse by the possibility of anonymity for the perpetrator and the freedom to torment the victim at any time of day or location.

In general, cyberbullying encompasses a range of behaviours that occur online and can have significant psychological and emotional impacts on victims. Some examples of cyberbullying include:

- Flaming - involves online fights or arguments, often characterised by hostile or inflammatory language.
- Exclusion - occurs when individuals are intentionally isolated or excluded from online communities or social circles.
- Masquerading – involves impersonating others online, often intending to deceive or manipulate.
- Denigration - encompasses posting hurtful comments, rumours, or embarrassing information about individuals to damage their reputation or self-esteem.
- Cyberstalking - involves repeatedly harassing or threatening someone online, often with the intention of instilling fear or causing emotional distress.
- Outing - occurs when private or sensitive information about an individual is publicly disclosed online without their consent, often with the intention of humiliating or exposing them to harm.

Trolling - involves deliberately provoking or antagonising others online for entertainment or personal gratification. Trolls may engage in inflammatory behaviour, make offensive comments, or deliberately disrupt online discussions or communities.

The different forms of cyberbullying highlight the diverse ways in which digital technology can be used as a tool for perpetrating harm and underscore the importance of addressing this pervasive issue in both online and offline contexts.

PERPETRATOR AND THE VICTIMS

Several factors can contribute to someone becoming a cyberbully. These include personal characteristics like low self-esteem or a tendency towards aggression, experiences of being bullied themselves, social pressures to fit in or gain status, and a lack of parental supervision or restrictions on technology use. Additionally, exposure to aggressive behaviour in media or online communities can also influence individuals.

On the other hand, victims of cyberbully usually fit certain personal characteristics such as having social anxiety, as well as previous experiences of bullying and social isolation. Additionally, factors like lack of digital literacy and sharing personal information online can make individuals more vulnerable.

Mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety, can also increase susceptibility to cyberbullying. Recognising these risk factors helps us identify those who may be at risk and implement strategies to prevent cyberbullying and support victims effectively.

ITS IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

Cyberbullying can have far-reaching and significant effects on mental health. Cyberbullying victims frequently suffer from elevated stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and feelings of isolation or loneliness.

The persistent abuse and humiliation one experiences online can cause one's sense of value and self-esteem to decline. Cyberbullying also has potential to exacerbate mental health problems like suicidal thoughts, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other symptoms associated with trauma.

Victims may also experience difficulties establishing and sustaining relationships, struggle with trust, and display behavioural changes including retreating from social interactions or academic pursuits. Understanding the severe effects of this issue is crucial for implementing effective interventions and providing support to those affected by cyberbullying.

COMBATING THE ISSUE HOLISTICALLY

To effectively address the problem of cyberbullying, several parties must work together, including parents, educators, legislators, mental health specialists, and IT corporations. To begin with, it is imperative to promote education and awareness regarding cyberbullying.

This entails putting in place workshops, in-school curriculum, and internet tools to teach kids, parents, and teachers about responsible online conduct, empathy, and the value of reporting instances of cyberbullying. Parental engagement is also crucial; parents should monitor their children's online activity, establish device usage limits, and have candid discussions regarding cyberbullying.

It is essential that schools have thorough anti-bullying policies in place and that their teachers receive training on how to identify and handle instances of cyberbullying. Providing support systems for both victims and perpetrators, such as counselling services and restorative justice programmes, can aid in addressing the issue effectively.

Second, technology solutions are a big part of the fight against cyberbullying. It is essential to work with tech companies to create and deploy features and tools that allow users to report and stop cyberbullying. Furthermore, it is critical to fund the study and creation of AI-powered algorithms to proactively identify and remove cyberbullying content.

Advocating for legislation and policies that combat cyberbullying and online harassment is also essential. Collaboration within the community is essential, encompassing partnerships between educational institutions, neighbourhood associations, law enforcement agencies, and mental health specialists to offer comprehensive support services, outreach initiatives, and crisis intervention to individuals impacted by cyberbullying.

By working together, combining technology, community support, legal actions, and education, we can make sure that everyone has a safer and more encouraging online experience. – **The HEALTH**