

Bullying in the home:

The recent furore regarding the utterances of a resident of Celebrity Big Brother have, in many ways, done no service to understanding the dynamics of bullying or abuse. It is a sad fact that one of the most common problems I encounter as a family psychologist is bullying and abusiveness in the home. I come across four main types of domestic bullying which are by one spouse of the other; by a teenager of his/her parents; by a sibling of another sibling; and the a parent of a child. There are other forms of domestic harassment, but these are the ones I encounter on a more regular basis.

Though it gets very little attention, the most common form of bullying in the home is between siblings. A lot of it is explained away as the everyday competitiveness between members of a family but it often gets out of hand and can cause considerable distress for the child who is the victim of this constant aggression. It is often not until later in life that the person is able to articulate what was happening to him or her as a child.

I also often meet with parents who feel they are being intimidated and harassed by one of their own children. It is not uncommon at all to find a teenager causing untold distress for his/her parents and siblings with his/her constant defiance, belligerence, verbal and physical abusiveness, and threats. It is very difficult for parents in this situation to deal with and come to terms with this often escalating problem because of the awful sense of failure they experience in not being able to handle their own child.

The other common form of domestic bullying is spousal. In its more visible forms it constitutes serious physical domestic violence and when it is less visible it takes the form of emotional bullying and abuse. Because we hear the term 'domestic violence' so frequently it often loses its meaning and we tend to confine it to occurrences of serious physical assault. However, those of us working in this field realise that more often than not physical violence is just the visible extreme of less visible patterns of emotional bullying and control.

Domestic abuse, bullying, or violence occurs when you consistently behave in a manner that makes someone else in your family feel bad about themselves. To bully someone in a family is to humiliate or diminish this person through verbal, emotional, psychological, or physical expressions that may be subtle or blatant. However, it is defined as a pattern of such behaviours rather than just a one-off out-of-character incident. It is to consistently intimidate or diminish another person by putting them down, punishing them, humiliating them, or making them feel small or inadequate over a period of time. The victim of this feels anxiety, fear, self-doubt, shame, and inadequacy.

The disturbing aspect to domestic abuse or domestic bullying is that at its core it often involves some element of sadistic pleasure derived from exerting power and control over another person. The abuser needs a victim of some sort in order to justify his or her own sense of importance or adequacy. The abuser needs, in some ways, to diminish another person in order to feel good about themselves.

Now it is important to understand that most people, at some point or other in their family life, will be abusive of other members of their family. We are all capable of either passively or actively being disrespectful or abusive of someone else. We might do this passively by giving someone the silent treatment, ignoring them, or showing them little respect. Or we can do it actively by letting fly and cursing them out of it. This, unfortunately, is life. We all hurt those who are close to us by putting them down or diminishing them.

However, what distinguishes the bully from the non-bully is that the non-bully quickly recognises the inappropriateness of their behaviour, takes responsibility for it, and goes about repairing the damage that their abusive or disrespectful behaviour caused. For the non-bully their behaviour is out of character and results in genuine repair of the damage done and typically does not happen again. The victim of the abuse typically is able to see it as such and is able to recover following the repair.

However, with the bully the abusive behaviour is part of a pattern of repeated incidents of similar behaviours. It is therefore more in-character, and is rarely repaired in a way that is commensurate with the hurt and abuse inflicted. In fact, more often than not, the bully blames the victim for their bad behaviour or else tries to 'sweeten' the victim up with an insincere gift that just glosses over the distress caused. It is many a violent man who has followed up a beating of his wife with a cynical bunch of flowers that humiliates his wife into actually saying 'thank you' to him.

In these ways we can make a distinction between what we call instrumental abuse and expressive abuse. Instrumental abuse takes the form of abuse that is part of a pattern of behaviour used as a tactic to control or humiliate another over time. Expressive abuse is when someone, in a manner that is entirely out of character for them, 'lets fly' but quickly repairs and makes amends for their behaviour, and does not repeat that behaviour again.

If every child or parent who told someone in their family to 'F off' were characterised as a bully, we would all be diagnosed as such. It's when we do it more than once or repeatedly to the same person that we have a problem.
