

UNDERSTANDING **BULLYING**

You don't have to face it alone

THE **HOPE** LINE

www.TheHopeLine.com

Know that you're **NOT ALONE**



Chat now at thehopeline.com/chat-live



Before anything else, know this: whatever you're facing, you don't have to face it by yourself.

TheHopeLine is here for you.

You can chat live with a Hope Coach, a real, caring person who will listen without judgment. It's free, it's confidential, and it's available 24 hours a day.

You matter. Your story isn't over. And there are people who want nothing more than to walk with you through this. **Read on, and we'll walk through what bullying is, why it happens, and what you can do about it.**

WHAT IS *BULLYING*?

Maybe someone at school won't leave you alone. Maybe the group chat turned on you. Maybe you're not even sure whether what's happening "counts" as bullying, but you know it hurts, and you know it keeps happening.

Here's a simple way to think about it.

"Bullying is when someone uses power (their size, their popularity, their words, or a screen to hide behind) to hurt someone else on purpose, again and again."

Those three pieces matter: it's meant to hurt, it happens more than once, and there's a power imbalance that makes it hard to just shake off.

A one-time argument with a friend isn't bullying. Two people going back and forth as equals isn't bullying either. Bullying has a lopsided feel to it, like the other person is trying to make themselves bigger by making you smaller.

If that's what's been happening to you, take a breath. You're not weak, you're not blowing things out of proportion, and you're definitely not alone. **This guide walks you through what bullying is, why people do it, and, most importantly, what you can actually do about it.**





You're Not the Only One

It can feel like everyone else has life figured out and you're the only one getting picked on. You're not. Bullying is common, and here's the part that doesn't get said enough: **it's beatable, and things really can get better.**

BULLYING *by the numbers*

19% of students say they've been bullied at school in the past year.

ONLY 44% of students who are bullied tell an adult at school.

What Do People Get Bullied For?

32.7% **APPEARANCE**

13% **RACE**

9.7% **DISABILITY**

9.4% **ETHNIC ORIGIN**

9.2% **GENDER**

8.9% **SEXUAL ORIENTATION**

5.8% **RELIGION**

Among students who are bullied repeatedly, many say it affects how they feel about themselves (*about 38%*), their schoolwork (*27%*), their friendships and family relationships (*24%*), and even their physical health (*19%*).

Bullying is also linked to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and trouble sleeping.

But here's what's just as true: with support, most people can get through it and come out okay! Reaching out early makes a real difference, and that's exactly what TheHopeline is here for.

***TYPES* OF BULLYING**

Bullying doesn't always look the same. Sometimes it's loud and physical. Sometimes it's quiet and sneaky, the kind that's hard to point to but still wrecks your whole day. Knowing the different forms can help you name what's happening to you, and naming it is the first step to handling it.



Physical Bullying

This is the kind most people picture: hitting, shoving, tripping, blocking someone's path, or messing with their stuff. It's the easiest to spot, and because it can cross into someone actually getting hurt, it's the kind that most often needs an adult involved fast.



Verbal Bullying

Name-calling, insults, threats, cruel "jokes" aimed at you over and over. People love to say words don't hurt. They do. Verbal bullying is one of the most common forms, and it can wear a person down just as much as anything physical.



Relational Bullying

This is the behind-the-scenes kind: spreading rumors, turning friends against you, leaving you out on purpose, embarrassing you in front of other people. It's built to mess with your friendships and your place in the group, which is exactly why it stings so much.



Cyberbullying

Same cruelty, new location: mean comments, rumors, or embarrassing posts sent through texts, DMs, group chats, or social media. What makes it feel inescapable is that it can follow you home, into your room, onto the phone in your hand. Nearly half of teens have run into it at some point, so if this is you, you're in a big crowd. There's a whole section coming up on how to handle it.

One **IMPORTANT** DIFFERENCE

There's a real gap between someone being mean to you and someone putting you in danger. Name-calling, rumors, and being left out are painful, and you can learn to disarm a lot of it (that's coming up). But if someone is physically hurting you, threatening you, or you feel unsafe, that's not something you should have to handle on your own. That's a "tell a trusted adult right now" situation.



WHY Do People Bully?

When someone's being cruel to you, "why are they doing this?" is one of the first questions that pops up. It's a good one, because the answer actually helps you decide how to respond. There's a simple move that helps: before you react, figure out what's really behind the aggression.

3 REASONS People Get Aggressive

Adapted from the SQUABBLES® framework by bullying expert Brooks Gibbs

It comes down to three motivations. When someone comes at you, they're usually doing one of three things:



BOTHERING

They're annoyed or in a bad mood, and they're taking it out on you. It's about them, not you.



JOKING

They think it's funny. Sometimes it is playful, but sometimes it hides something meaner.



HURTING

They actually want to cause you pain, usually because they're carrying pain of their own.

Figuring out which one you're dealing with changes everything. You don't answer a bad-mood comment the same way you answer someone trying to wound you. Reading the motivation puts you back in the driver's seat.

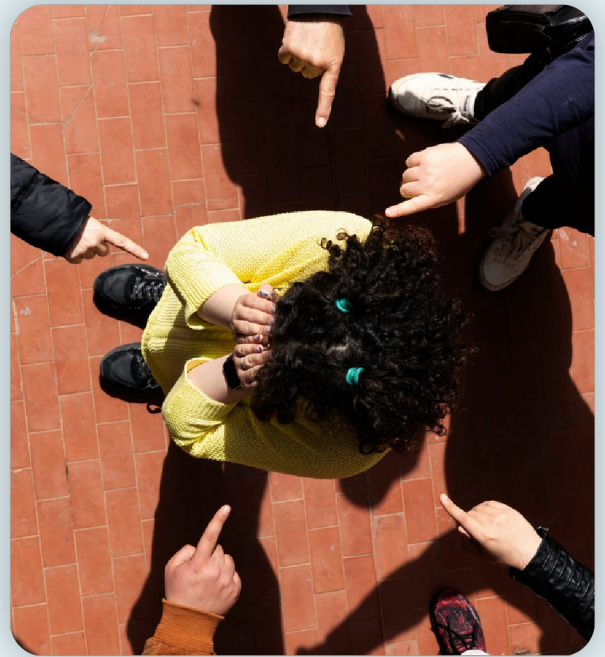


Hurt People Hurt People

Here's something that's true more often than not: people who go out of their way to hurt others are usually hurting themselves. The person bullying you might be dealing with stuff at home, getting bullied by someone else, or feeling small and trying to feel big by stepping on you.

That doesn't make it okay. It doesn't excuse a single mean thing they've said. But understanding it can do two things for you: it takes some of the sting out (their cruelty says more about them than it ever will about you), and it helps you respond from a place of strength instead of fear.

I'M GETTING BULLIED! *WHAT DO I DO???*



First, Make Sure You're Safe

Before anything else: if someone is physically hurting you, threatening you, or you feel like you're in danger, that is not yours to carry alone. Tell a trusted adult right away, a parent, teacher, coach, youth leader, or school counselor, someone who can step in.

If you're ever in immediate danger, call 911. And if the weight of all this has you feeling hopeless or scared, you can chat with a Hope Coach, free and confidential, at thehopeline.com/chat-live. Reaching out isn't weak. It's one of the bravest, smartest things you can do.



Everything else in this section is for the everyday cruelty, the words, the rumors, the online junk. For that, you've got more power than you think.

*Chat with a
Hope Coach*



How to Disarm a Bully

A method adapted from bullying expert Brooks Gibbs

STEP 1: Don't get upset.

Here's what a bully is really after: your reaction. When they insult you and you get angry, cry, or fire back, they win, because they've proven they can control how you feel. But when their words bounce off you, they lose their power. The prize they were reaching for just isn't there anymore.

This doesn't mean you feel nothing. It means you don't hand them the satisfaction of seeing it. Your calm is your superpower, and your happiness is your choice, not theirs.



STEP 2: Treat them like a friend.

This one sounds backwards, but it's genius. Instead of matching their meanness, you respond with warmth. Not fake, over-the-top niceness, just an easy, unbothered friendliness that refuses to take the bait.

If someone says something cruel, you can shrug and say, "Yeah, maybe. Anyway..." or even agree with a laugh: "Ha, you're probably right." When you're not rattled and you're not fighting back, there's nothing for the bullying to feed on. Most of the time, it fizzles out fast.

The point isn't to actually become buddies with someone who's tearing you down. It's that kindness and calm are almost impossible to argue with. You take away their power without ever throwing a punch or an insult.



When the Bullying is Online

Cyberbullying has its own playbook, because the screen changes things. **If someone's coming after you online:**



Step away from the screen first. You don't owe anyone an instant reply. Give yourself a minute to breathe before you decide anything.



Keep the evidence. Screenshot the messages or posts. If you ever need to show a parent, teacher, or the platform what's going on, you'll be glad you have it.



Block and report. Every major app has tools to block people and report abuse. Use them. It's not running away, it's shutting a door that never should've been open.



Tell a trusted adult. Especially if there are threats, private photos, or someone who won't stop. You don't have to sort the tech out alone.



Keep the "don't get upset" rule. It works online too. A cruel comment loses its power the second you decide not to feed it a reaction.

Remember... You are not what they say.

When someone repeats something cruel enough times, it's easy to start believing it. So please hear this: a bully's words are not the truth about who you are. They're just words from someone who's hurting.

You have worth that no insult can touch, no rumor can erase, and no bad day can cancel out. On the days that feel heavy, talk to someone you trust about how you're really doing. And if it ever feels like too much, a Hope Coach is here to listen, free and confidential, at thehopeline.com/chat-live. You were never meant to carry this by yourself.

Standing Up for Your **FRIEND** Who's Getting Bullied.

Maybe you're not the one being bullied. Maybe it's someone you care about. That instinct to help? Hold onto it. Sometimes one friend in someone's corner is the thing that changes everything.

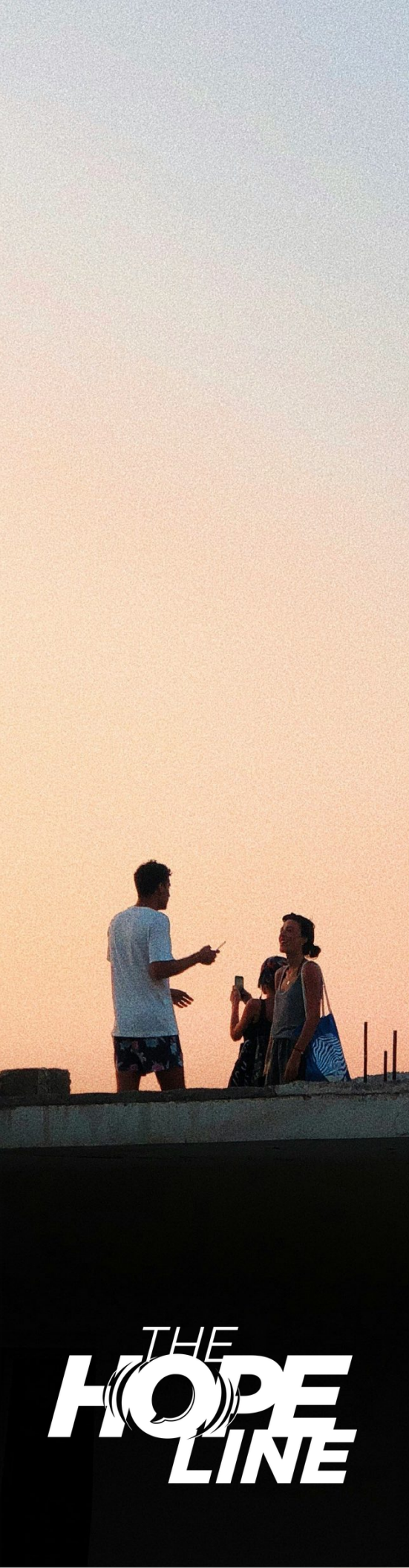


How to tell if a friend is getting bullied.

People who are getting bullied don't always come out and say it. Sometimes they're embarrassed, sometimes they're scared it'll get worse. Here's what you might notice:

- They seem down, anxious, or just not like themselves lately.
- They're suddenly avoiding school, the bus, certain places, or certain people.
- They've lost interest in things they used to love.
- They start "losing" things and coming home with damaged belongings.
- They pull away from friends and want to be alone more than usual.

None of these prove someone's being bullied on their own. But when a few show up together, it's worth gently checking in.

A vertical photograph on the left side of the page shows the silhouettes of three people standing on a rooftop or ledge against a bright, orange-hued sunset sky. One person is on the left, gesturing with their hand. Two other people are on the right, one holding a phone. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

How to **ACTUALLY HELP** Your Friend Who is Getting Bullied

Ask and really listen

A simple “hey, are you okay? You’ve seemed off lately” can crack the door open. Let them talk without rushing to fix it.

Be the friend who stays

Sit with them at lunch. Walk with them in the hall. Bullies look for people who are alone, so your presence alone makes a real difference.

Don’t give bullying an audience

When people laugh along or share the cruel post, it fuels the fire. Refusing to play along, and getting others to do the same, takes away the reward.

Help them get somewhere safe

If things heat up, help your friend walk away and get to a spot with adults around.

Bring in a trusted adult

This isn’t tattling. When someone’s getting hurt, looping in a parent, teacher, or counselor is exactly the right move, especially if there’s any danger.

Point them to help

Let them know they can chat with a Hope Coach any time, free and confidential, at thehopeline.com

THE
HOPE
LINE

A Spiritual Perspective

If you've been told (in words, or just in the way you've been treated) that you don't matter, here's a truth worth holding onto: you were made on purpose, by a God who loves you more than you can imagine.

The Bible says you're "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). Not by accident. Not as an afterthought. On purpose, with care. **Whatever a bully says about you, it doesn't get the final word.** God does, and He calls you loved, valued, and His.

HOPE

Talk with someone about your questions

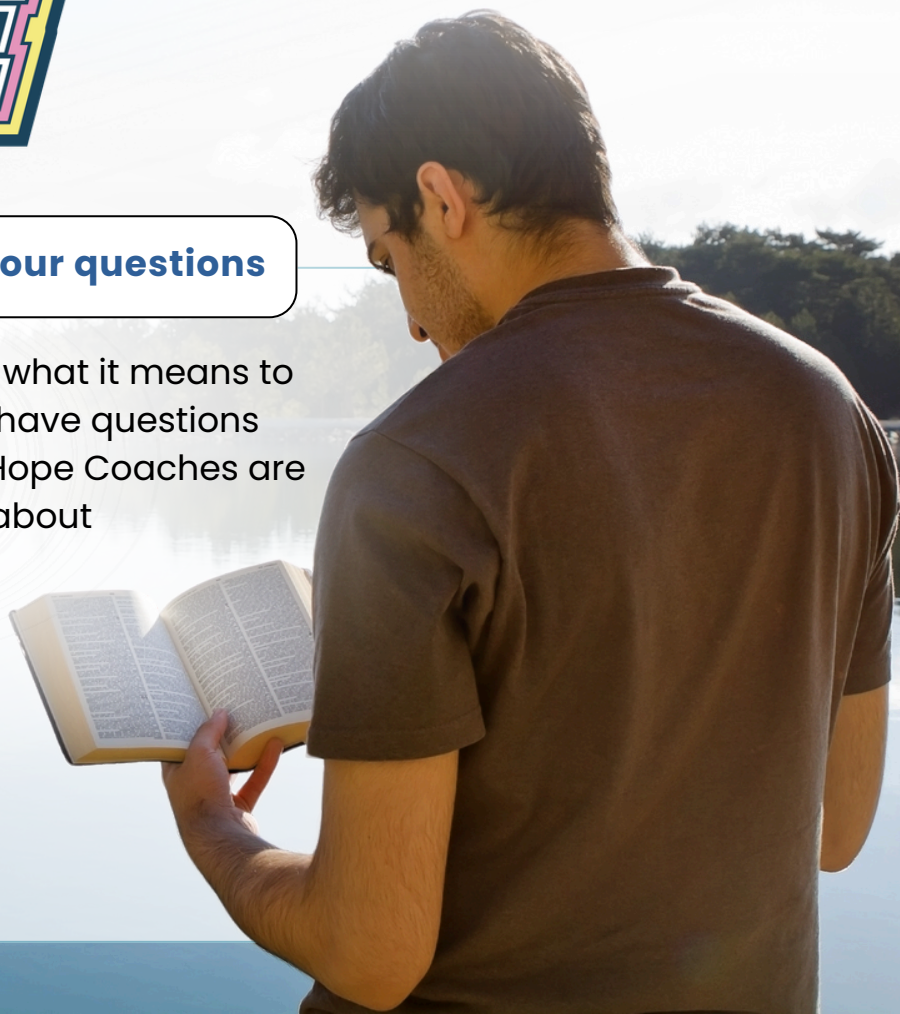
If you want to know more about what it means to have a relationship with God or have questions about the topic of bullying, our Hope Coaches are available 24/7 to chat with you about whatever is on your mind.



← **CHAT
LIVE WITH
A HOPE
COACH**

That same love can shape how you respond, too. Meeting cruelty with kindness is like bringing light into a dark room, the darkness simply can't win. Choosing not to hate the people who hurt you isn't weakness. It's one of the strongest, most freeing things you can do, because it keeps their bitterness from taking root in you.

And you don't have to do any of this on your own strength. When you feel worn down, you can lean on God, and you can lean on the people who care about you. You are loved. You are not alone. And there is always hope.





Our mission is to help students and young adults in crisis by offering sound advice and a safe place to connect. Through our online resources and the ability to chat live with a Hope Coach 24/7, we are here to help people make a true connection.

Founded by Dawson McAllister in 1991, TheHopeLine is a 100% donor funded ministry. If you would like to learn more about partnering with us, visit thehopeline.com/partners-in-hope.



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Sources

National Center for Education Statistics, Student Reports of Bullying: Results From the 2022 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCES 2024-109rev), 2024. Data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, covering the 2021–22 school year. Behind the figures on how often bullying happens, what students are targeted for, how many tell an adult, and its effects.

Pew Research Center, Teens and Cyberbullying 2022 (2022). Behind the figure on how many teens have faced cyberbullying.

StopBullying.gov, Effects of Bullying and Facts About Bullying (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services). Behind the mental-health link, and the responsible framing around bullying and suicide.

The response steps in this guide (reading why someone is being aggressive, staying calm, and answering with warmth) are adapted, with credit, from the work of bullying expert Brooks Gibbs, including his two-step disarm method and three-motivations model (SQUABBLES®; Rethink Bullying®). Learn more at brooksgibbs.com.