



Understanding bullies and bullying

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Jean looked up at me and wept. “I am always the butt of the jokes. She makes my life hell, blames me for her mistakes, gives me impossible deadlines and then takes all the praise for my work. She is nice to my face, but then I hear from others what she’s really been saying about me! The worst thing is that at first I thought she was my friend!”

Many of my clients have had some experience of bullying. Bullying is intentional aggressive behaviour designed to undermine the wellbeing of another person. Astonishingly, one in four people in the so-called ‘caring’ professions reports being bullied by a line manager in the UK over a given 12 month period. (1) But what exactly do we mean by aggression?

It’s a tough world out there

Aggressive behaviour is plentiful – just watch any nature programme. Penguins hunt fish, sea lions bite penguins, great white sharks attack seals (and occasionally surfers), leopards and cheetahs have got it in for wildebeest and pathogens in the human body attack healthy organs and body tissue. One creature seeks to dominate another; if this wasn’t the case, there couldn’t be harmony! The idea of ‘natural harmony’ includes the necessity for violence and aggression on some levels. But I question whether these creatures can be said to be ‘bullying’ one another, as their actions are purely instinctive and the aim is less to cause deliberate hurt to the other creature for the fun of it than to provide food for the instigator.

So on a basic level one animal seeks to dominate another. But what about us human types?

Human beings are highly peaceful

Well, we certainly do seek to dominate. And you could be forgiven for believing from what you see on the news that people everywhere are violent. But actually, as Clive Bronhill points out in his book ‘The Eternal Child’, compared with other primates we humans are extremely passive and non-violent. Get a clutch of ten gorillas together and they’ll tear one another apart. Humans, in contrast, can live in relative peace in cities the size of Cairo (population 15.2 million). And most of us do live in peace with one another. The fact that violence is still a pretty well universal taboo also shows that most people want to live peaceable lives.

Unlike other animals, humans have evolved a part of the brain (the frontal cortex) to be able to override instinctive drives. This means both that we have more control over violent impulses and that we can reflect on what we do. If a gorilla feels the urge to mate or to attack it will go straight ahead – ‘right or wrong’ doesn’t enter into it.

So we may not be hopelessly violent as a species, but we do seek to dominate each other and sometimes we can dominate in very subtle and almost undetectable ways. This type of aggression we call manipulation.

'I'm on your side – honestly'

Domination of one person by another doesn't have to be at all physical in nature. And dominance can be even more effective (and hard to combat) if it is disguised as something else – 'support', for example, or 'love'.

Supporting someone seems like an unquestionably good thing, and often it is. But how often does it happen that people who have started off as 'supporters' of a cause or a person or an idea eventually either turn against what they originally supported or at least try to take personal control of it, to dominate it, in such a way that the original intention gets completely lost? Supporting something in order to become connected with it so that it can then be altered from the inside is a form of domination which could be described as parasitical. And all the while (or at least at first) the dominating drive is disguised as 'support'.

This is why there are hundreds of variations and different sects within one and the same religion. It also explains why you hear people complain in romantic relationships that they are not 'allowed' to do this or that! Why would they think this unless the person who professed to love them wasn't also 'dominating' them in some way?

This can be likened to a pathogen ingratiating itself into a host cell by mimicking a healthy part of that cell and then destroying it from within. We might think of the billions given in aid to 'support' poor countries in Africa, which then financially cripples those countries as they cannot afford the impossibly high repayment interest rates. Or we might recall the notorious Kathy Bates, the stalking and ultimately murderous 'number one fan' of the famous author in the movie 'Misery'. Her 'support/love' of him was certainly extremely aggressive although she herself did not see it that way.

When love is not love but manipulation

If someone loves you for who you are, respects you and is respected and loved by you in return, this is wonderful. But if someone 'loves' you by doing all kinds of things for you that you hadn't asked them to do, and then turns round and says things like: "After all I've done for you; and you can't even do this for me!" or "If you really loved me, you would do...X!" then that's not love, it's domination, however you dress it up.

But there is a further complication to this kind of subtle aggression.

Unconscious domination

This kind of domination, where it is disguised as something else, is often unconscious behaviour rather than a conscious and deliberate effort to control. This means that it may be unrecognised by either the aggressor or the victim.

It's perfectly possible for someone to emotionally blackmail someone else at the same time as fully believing that they really do love them and would never want to hurt them in any way. The victim of this kind of aggressive domination may believe it's a just a sign of how much they are truly loved – the greater the demands, the more they must be loved.

To use another movie reference, Norman Bates in the movie 'Psycho' truly believed that his mother (whose influence dominated him from beyond the grave) really did have his best interests at heart.

OK, so a lot of what I've been talking about here concerns domination. This is not to say that someone who dominates another doesn't love them at all, but the dominating behaviour is there, and domination equals aggression. Lest you think I am overly cynical, I do believe there is real love and real support in the world – honestly.

So there is dominating behaviour, and then there is bullying. I think bullying proper is consciously and deliberately intended to produce pain.

This is the kind of devastating bullying that happens in schools and in the work place and can wreak havoc with people's lives. People who are bullies tend instinctively to understand how people 'work' at the same time as having a distinct lack of empathy. This combination of psychological insight and emotional detachment is poisonous. So how do bullies know how to hurt their victims?

How bullies work

Bullies will test for potential victims although anyone can be targeted. They tend to pick on people who are nervous, shy and conscientious. This makes sense – a nervous person seems to be someone who can have their emotional 'buttons' pushed more easily. A shy person is more likely to keep the bullying to themselves and not tell others. A conscientious person will tend to assume that they themselves are somehow at fault, or can stop the bullying by working harder or doing better somehow. They will tend to look to themselves for the blame rather than the bully. A bully will stop you getting what you need to thrive in the world.

As the Human Givens Approach (2) has shown, all people everywhere have innate emotional (as well as physical) needs which have to be met in order for us to thrive and feel happy in life. People need:

- a sense of safety and security
- a sense of control over their lives
- to give and receive quality attention
- to feel connected to a wider group or community
- a sense of a role in life, or status
- to feel stretched and challenged so as to avoid stagnation and boredom, including having goals for the future
- privacy and time to reflect.

Many of these needs overlap and interconnect. If someone has a sense of control, this will give them a greater sense of security and they may therefore feel better connected to those around them, for example. A bully instinctively knows about these very human needs and will block their victim from having their needs met. So the victim's need for a sense of safety and security may be blocked by the bully suddenly shouting at them in front of colleagues, or dropping hints that their job isn't secure...

Another common bullying tactic is social exclusion, which readily blocks the completion of many of the above needs, including the need to feel connected to others and the need for status.

In fact, any type of bullying you can think of will in some shape or form prevent the victim's needs being met.

Furthermore, the bully will often meet their own needs at the expense of the victim. Taking credit for another's work is a cheap and lazy way of meeting the need for status – at the expense of someone else's status.

The cost of not getting basic needs met

Not getting needs met can lead to anxiety (including post traumatic stress disorder), addiction and clinical depression – and all these are common results of being bullied. A bully victim will be less damaged by the bullying if they can at least get their needs met elsewhere in life. But the stress the victim experiences may mean they lose confidence generally and so stop getting their own needs met. Loss of confidence may lead them to stop going out, thus cutting themselves off from attention and human contact. A bully may attack someone for not being

good at their job, but then the experience of being bullied will actually make people less effective at work so that the bully's charges of incompetence become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Jean told me with genuine anger how people had tried to advise her to just 'stand up' to her bully. But the longer you continue in the role of victim, the harder it feels to suddenly act assertively. We humans like to be consistent, even when that consistency works against us.

But we did get Jean back to work feeling strong and genuinely supported. The bullying behaviour stopped, thanks to a combination of Jean becoming stronger and calmer and the bully being dealt with internally by her line manager. We looked at Jean's basic needs in and out of work and made sure they were met. We practised ways of being clear and calm when 'under fire' and Jean's self-esteem rose. We also looked at why it wasn't Jean's fault that she had been targeted. This is a very common feeling in victims.

We can't always hope to stop other people trying to dominate us, but we can influence the way we respond to such people and a phrase that Jean grew to love was: 'Water off a duck's back'.

For tips on responding to bullying, see '[How to handle a bully](#)'

- (1) The Rowntree Report 2001
- (2) Humans Givens: A new approach to emotional health and wellbeing. Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell 2001

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