

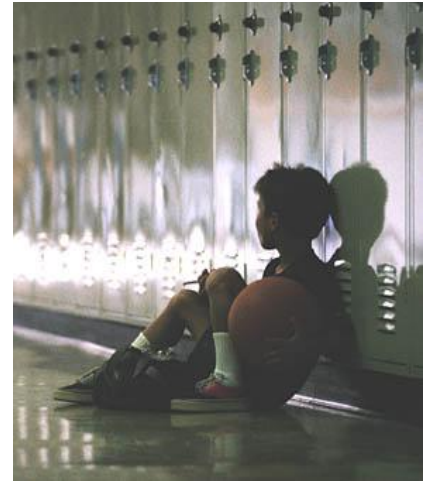
The Links Between Bullying and Addiction

As an addict for 17 years, someone who was bullied and a bully in school myself, I've been looking closely at the connections between the two. And I often asked myself: **Can bullying be an addiction? Well here's my conclusion... YES it can.**

First let's be clear what we are talking about when we say "addiction," because many people have many different meanings for this word.

When I say "addiction," I am referring to the condition in which someone keeps repeating a behavior – one that results in harmful consequences to themselves and/or the people around them – but seemingly has no choice. The power to stop seems beyond their control.

Addiction can come in many forms. Most people think of it as being about nicotine, alcohol and drugs. But there are many other things to which people can be addicted, including food, relationships, work, gambling... and bullying.



How Does One Become Addicted to Bullying?

To say I know "The Truth" would be both egotistical and a lie. However, I can share my own personal experience and that of working with hundreds of adults and kids in recovery.

What I have noticed is that all addicts had situations happen in their past – many had abusive things said to them, or harsh mental, emotional or physical treatment – that resulted in them making a series of disempowering core decisions about themselves. Those decisions go something like this:

*"Because of what's happened to me, **something must be wrong with me.** Because something is wrong with me, I feel bad about myself. And because I feel bad about myself, I need to do something to make myself feel better."*

"I know I shouldn't be doing some of these things, but I'm gonna do them anyway because they make me feel better. And the consequences won't be too bad if no one finds out—so I'll hide and lie about what I am doing from my parents and other people."

This is what happened for me, and for countless other addicts I've seen. It starts with pain inside, the need to **avoid feeling bad**, and the attempt to find anything that will make this happen.

Sometimes these **avoidance behaviours** show up in the form of smoking, drinking, drugs, eating, playing video games, and obsessively being on the Internet. And sometimes it takes the form of bullying—whether it's beating other kids up, intimidating them by calling them names and putting them down, or scaring other kids into making fun of others.

Power, Control and Feeling Safe

So how does bullying help me **avoid feeling bad** and make me feel better about myself?

In the addiction recovery community we have a term which describes all addicts. The term is "control-freak." Addicts will do whatever we have to do to try and control our world and the people around us. Why? Because the more control we have, the safer and happier we think we will be.

Control can take different forms. Sometimes, we are extremely nice, kind and self-sacrificing towards others, in order to (manipulatively) get what we want. Sometimes, we play the victim and guilt-trip people into doing what we want them to do. And sometimes, we are just plain nasty, selfish and angry. We threaten or bully others to get what we want and feel better about ourselves.

This is why I have tremendous compassion for bullies. Like addicts, bullies are just doing the best they can to survive; the best they know how, to get what they want and need inside.

Power and control are like two sides of the same coin. If I'm feeling unloved or powerless in some part of my life – at home or at school, for example – I'll use whatever power or control I have to get this in another part of my life. Unfortunately, the behaviours we use only give us temporary feelings of power, safety, exhilaration or peace. Afterwards, we feel even more powerless, weak and unhappy inside.

Some Personal Experiences

When I was a kid, I grew up with my brother and my mother in a part of Toronto that now has the highest crime rate in the entire city. Lots of drugs and guns are sold there today. The area is called Jane and Finch.

Looking back, I know it must have been hard for my Mom to raise the two of us—a single mother on a very low income, struggling with her own addictions to shopping, and to nicotine. Smoking three packs a day and trying to provide two boys with everything that kids with money would have is not an easy trip.

Mom was both amazing and confusing. She loved us as much as any mother could. She worked hard and sacrificed to give us whatever we needed. Sometimes she even dated guys she didn't really love in order to have a male figure around the house. But she was also quite abusive.

Mom had a tough childhood. She was abused. Frequently, Mom would get frustrated at either herself or our behaviors, then say and do things that were taught to her by her parents—She would send us to bed without dinner or hit us with a fly swatter. Sometimes she would pull down my pants and beat me hard with a belt. But seemingly worst of all, she would call me names, and say things like: "I wish you were never born. I hate you. Why don't you take a walk on the highway and not come back? You are so selfish. You are such an idiot. Why don't you go live with your father?" Well, you get the idea.

Don't get me wrong. My mother also said many encouraging things like "I'm proud of you" and "I love you." And I know that she was, and did. But her mixed messages confused me. And the harsh things she said sunk into my heart 10 times deeper than the good ones.

In fact, it didn't really matter how often she would say good things to me or about me. When she'd turn from Mr. Hyde to Dr. Jekyll and say those nasty things, those were the times I "knew" she was speaking "the real truth." The others were just things she said when she was in a good mood or when I'd done something to EARN her approval. But deep down I believed there really was something terribly wrong with me—otherwise, why would she ever say those nasty things?

"We cannot underestimate the impact, both positive and negative, of the family. From our first awareness as infants... we take our cues from the people, events and messages that surround us, and we may reflect them back in our own behavior."

From the book, Addiction: Why Can't They Just Stop?, Based on the HBO series, produced in association with the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

[Note to readers: All this may sound like I am blaming my Mother—and the truth is that, for many years, I did. I believed that she (and my father) were the cause of my becoming an addict. However, lately I've come to see this differently. While I may have been victimized or mistreated by them, I no longer see myself as a "victim"—because this way of thinking keeps me powerless and ultimately leads to me acting out in one of my addictions. More on that in another article...]

Life at School

When I went to my first school, many of the other kids in my government-subsidized rental building went there too. The friends I picked came from similar circumstances, and many had parents who hit and verbally abused them too. As a result, these kids were also trying to make up for how weak and powerless they felt at home - and did so by calling other kids names or beating them up.

Even with my best friends, we used to call each other the worst names—whatever we could think of to make ourselves feel strong and powerful. It was the way we had been brought up. And it was the way we treated each other.

If you think about it, it really does make sense. Kids don't just become bullies out of nowhere. We were bullied at home by the people we worshipped most, the people who we were told loved us most in the world. This "love" was modeled to us, and we learned that it looked like being abused. When we went out to socialize with other kids, we naturally attracted friends of similar economic backgrounds and hardships with whom we had something in common. And we treated each other the same way as we were treated at home.

For us, that was just normal. We learned from our two most intimate networks (family and friends) that expressing affection looked like name-calling and abuse. So we took it and passed it on. And each time we did, we felt more and more worthless. The cycle, and the pain, grew.

"Adolescence is that period of trying to pull back from the parents and establish your own identity... This is often done by establishing a relationship with a peer group. And what those peers are doing, or not doing – using or not using – has a great deal of influence on kids."

—Michael Dennis, Adolescent Addiction Treatment expert, Lighthouse Institute, Chestnut Health Systems, Bloomington, Illinois.

In order to be respected and loved, we also learned that we had to be stronger than others. The way to do this was either to win or to hurt other people. Sometimes I did this by being the best in my class. Sometimes it was through sports (which I often just played to try and hurt others). And sometimes we simply threw rocks and stones at other kids instead.

A Spoonful of Sugar Makes...

To deal with the pain inside, one of the things I turned to frequently was sugar. It was the easiest thing I could find to make me feel better. So I ate it whenever I could—candy, ice cream, sugar filled breakfast cereal, whatever.

Unfortunately, candy costs money. So what does a kid do? Well at first I stole money from my mother. Then when I was about 10 years old, I started a club called the Golden Key Club. Recruiting other kids who lived in the area, our goal was to steal from our parents. Once a week, we would take whatever money we stole and buy McDonald's junk food and share it with the whole group.

Sugar was like a drug for me. Almost every day, other kids and I would go to the grocery store during lunch and steal bubble gum or whatever we could get. I regularly went to a local department store and stole huge, triple-size chocolate bars.

For a while, I had a paper route. They would give me magazines that I was supposed to take door to door and drop them off. But I just threw them away. All I wanted was the paycheque, so I could buy more candy. One day, I even robbed a blind woman on my newspaper route—again, to buy more candy.

Sugar Turns to Solvents

When I'd finished grade 8, my mother moved us to a new community to live with her latest boyfriend. My new school was four hours away from where all my friends were, and I was the new kid on the block.

All of a sudden, I wasn't the popular kid any more. It was hard to make friends, and I felt alone and scared. On top of that, my Mom couldn't afford to buy me real jeans, just second-hand pants from Goodwill or Salvation Army. The other kids saw I was poor, and they ridiculed me because of it. I was the outcast, the weirdo. It was un-cool to be my friend. And the other kids took every opportunity to make fun of me.

To avoid being laughed at, I constantly tried to hide. I never went into the cafeteria anymore. Instead, I asked my music teacher if I could practice my instrument during lunch. As a result, the teacher became somewhat of a surrogate father to me. He even brought me to his church.

One day our grade was about to do a history test, but the master test with the answers went missing. Someone started a rumour that I had taken it, and then all the kids started blaming me. I hadn't done it, but that's what everybody thought.

First, my architecture teacher confronted me. "I never stole it," I said, trying my best to convince him. But he didn't believe me. Then my music teacher – the person I was closest to – took me aside and said, "Where's the test? You've got to give it back!" Even though I told him the truth, he didn't believe me either. And suddenly,

he began treating me differently. It was like he cut me out of his heart emotionally because he thought I'd stolen the test and lied about it.

Even the adults I'd gone to, to be liked and accepted, were now rejecting me. I felt completely alone—hopeless and helpless. Completely unloved. And I couldn't figure it out. Why was this happening to me? Why had everybody turned against me? **What was wrong with me?**

It didn't matter how much sugar I had any more. I needed something harder. And from that day forward, I turned to solvents. Each day I would eagerly come home after school, soak a cloth in paint and varnish remover and inhale it so I could get high. It was the only way I knew to **get away from those feelings** of not being wanted and not being liked by an entire school.

I did the same thing every day for months, until my behavior became too much for my mother to cope with. And she sent me away to live with my alcoholic father.

So, What is Bullying?

I share this story not just to show the connection between addictions and bullying, but to show the many sides of what bullying can look like. It's not just the obvious, like somebody beating up or intimidating another kid. It can often be much more subtle.

When those kids made fun of me and my clothes, or made it un-cool to talk to me or be my friend, that was bullying. When they blamed me for stealing the test, that was just as severe as a kid threatening me or punching me in the head. And what the adults did when they decided not to trust me anymore, blaming me with no evidence, that too had the equivalent impact on my life as if they'd bullied me.

So perhaps we need to broaden the term "bullying," just as I did earlier for "addictions."

For me, bullying is any kind of behaviour or action that causes someone to feel like they don't belong, or are less than the rest of the community or group. It can be what someone says, does, or doesn't do. Something that isolates a kid or causes them to stand out or not feel included. "You don't deserve to play on the team, Bob. You're too fat." Or "Hey, four eyes, you look stupid." It can be ridicule in front of one's peers. Or even just "We don't trust you..." from an adult. All can have a traumatic effect on a young mind.

Bullying can take many forms. And many times, it can lead to an addiction.