



Prepared by:

Dr. Kathleen Weissberg  
National Director of Education  
[kweissberg@selectrehab.com](mailto:kweissberg@selectrehab.com)

# Having the Difficult Conversations

What to Say to a Bully

# Objectives

- Describe the incidence and characteristics of bullying behaviors in senior living
- Identify preventative measures communities can implement to reduce impact and mitigate bullying behaviors
- List targeted communication, responses and interventions to reduce reoccurrence of senior-to-senior bullying

# What is Bullying?

Bullying is defined as “aggressive behavior which: is intended to harm, occurs repetitively over time, contains an element of power differential, and occurs at any stage of life.”



# Incidence of Bullying

- About 1 in 5 older adults reports experiencing bullying
- Actual rate is likely larger
- Many seniors do not report
- Bullying can happen in any number of places, contexts, or locations including online
- Most senior-to-senior aggression is verbal abuse
- Men and women are equally likely to be the victim as well as the aggressor

# Types of Bullying Behaviors

- Verbal
- Physical
- Anti-social
- Damage to property





# Individuals Who Bully

Bullies are more likely to use power and control strategies at the expense of others

Typical traits of individuals who bully:

- Lacks empathy
- Has few friends
- “Needs” power and control
- Struggles with individual differences
- Suffers from low self-esteem
- Empowered by causing conflict, or making others feel threatened, fearful, hurt

(Hazelden Foundation, 2008)



# Types of Bullies

- Narcissistic bully
- Impulsive bully
- Physical bully
- Verbal bully
- Secondary bully



# Why Do Older-Adults Bully?

- If a senior was a bully in school, it's likely they won't suddenly grow out of the behavior.
- Some adults may become bullies as a way to regain control of their lives.
- It may be a reaction to having to share spaces and resources in living facilities.
- It's important to note that some conditions such as Dementia can cause aggression, but the senior is not purposefully bullying.



# Risk Factors for Being Bullied



- Passive v. Provocative targets
- Being a new resident of a senior living facility
- Being widowed or divorced
- Lack of a support network
- Living with mental illness
- Being introverted, shy, or passive

# Signs Someone is a Victim



- Acting out by venting or wanting to leave the community
- Emotional outbursts in the form of indignation, nervousness, sadness, or even urge to take one's life
- Negative reactions to social activities and communal spaces
- Debilitating mental health

# What is the Impact of Bullying?

- It is common for communities to take a passive stance
- Bullying behaviors can escalate to physical violence
- Impact is not exclusive to the recipients of such behavior
- Individuals who witness bullying also experience negative consequences
- Bullying can also be targeted toward staff members of organizations serving older adults

# What Can You Do?

To get a bully to stop – you have to stop rewarding/reinforcing them. But this may take some time.



# Comebacks That Work

- The easier, the better
- Creativity not required – repetition is
- Brainstorm and practice
  - Thank you for that information – it's very helpful.
  - I didn't know that. Really?
  - I'm so sorry you feel that way.
  - Ok.
  - Whatever you say.
  - Stop. (said as an order – not as a plea).



# Comebacks That Work

- Whatever!
- Do you feel better now?
- If you're talking about me behind my back, clearly my life is a lot more interesting than yours is!
- Let's move on!
- You finally found something funny to say?
- I'm not sure why you keep saying these things about me, but I don't care.
- Enough!
- Here we go again. This is boring. Let me know when you're done.
- I've been called worse from better.
- Wow, did you come up with that all by yourself?
- Pardon me, but you seem to think that I care.

# Empathy

- All behavior is communication, and sometimes that communication is a cry for help
  - People who bully are often recipients of hate or abuse themselves and can feel powerless or unsafe
  - People who did not create secure bonds in their lives or not taught about their emotions
  - Outlet for extreme stress or change
  - Were they a victim of bullying and are retaliating?

# Three Phases of Empathy

- Emotional sharing
- Empathetic concern
- Perspective-taking



# Empathy

- Shift Your Perspective
- Look To Your Actions
- Forgive And Set Boundaries



# Say This ... and Not That

Say This	Not That
You seem like you're hurting.	Stop! Why would you hurt him like that?
It is ok to be sad, angry, confused, etc.. It is not ok to hurt others with our words or actions.	You are such a bully.
You are safe. I am here for you.	Go away, no one wants to be around someone acting like this.
You are not defined by your behaviors. I believe in you.	You are not nice ... kind ... good.
Can you help me understand what's going on?	What is wrong with you?

- I am going to choose to walk away.
- What you're doing feels hurtful. I understand you are hurting, too.
- When your voice is calm, I'll share my thoughts and feelings.



- “Imagine if someone just said (or did) exactly what you just did to someone you really love and care about.”
- “What you're doing is hurting someone, but I understand you're struggling too.”
- “How would you feel if someone did this to you and what will you do to make things right?”
- “You never know what somebody might be going through; your actions and words could be the thing to push them over the edge. It’s not worth it.”
- “Do you realize that your behavior is not nice? Have you stopped to think how your behavior is affecting her/him? How do you think you would feel if someone did that to you?”
- “If someone did that to you, what would you say to them?”
- “You never know a person’s struggle, so treat people with kindness; your cruel actions could send them over the edge.”
- “Would you like it if this was happening to your \_\_\_\_\_ (insert relation)?”

# Say “Stop!”

- Stop doing this — no one deserves to be treated this way!”
- "Stop. We need to talk."
- “Stop, you have no idea what your actions can cause someone else to do and the price for finding out is more than you or anyone should ever have to pay.”
- “Stop! You’re hurting him/her!” Then befriend the victim and walk away.
- “I need you to stop treating X that way. It’s hurtful and completely inappropriate.”
- “Stop and think about what you’re saying.”
- “Stop that. You are bothering and offending me when you behave that way, and we don't do that here. I know you can behave better than that.”
- “Excuse me, it’s not OK to make fun of another person (or whisper behind their back or exclude someone). That’s not how we treat people here. Please stop.”

# Ask “Why?”

- There is always a story; there is always a reason
- Go to the person being targeted and remove them from the situation
- Behavior is a form of communication
- Bullying is a learned behavior

# The Behavior is Not OK, Allowed, or Right

- “No more, not here, never.”
- “We don’t do that here.”
- “Hey man, you don't have to treat people like that. That ain't right.”
- “It’s not okay to say that to someone living here. Are we clear?”
- “It’s not okay to say that to someone living here. Are we clear?”
- “Sending that kind of text is unacceptable. Are we good?”
- “Leaving one person out of the group is not going to work. Let’s fix this and move on.”

# Tell the Person That You Want to Talk

- “We need to talk.”
- “I’d like to talk to you, may I?”
- “Tell me, please, what’s making you so angry that you want to get back at him/her?”





# Acknowledge What the Person is Trying to Achieve

- “I know bullying her gives you this ‘high’ and makes you feel almighty and powerful. But the truth is, when you look back on what you've just done, I promise you won't feel all-mighty or powerful; you will just look in the mirror and feel sad.”
- “Your abuse of others does not make you better.”

# Offer Help

- “You don't need to be this kind of person. You have the power to make the world better, so let's figure out how you're going to use that power.”
- “You wanted attention and now you have mine. Bullying him will not relieve the hurt you're feeling. But I can certainly help.”
- “Though I cannot assure you that I can fix this immediately or completely, I will not give up on helping you if you do not give up on me while I try to help you.”

# Organizational Interventions

- Develop clear rules and expectations for behavior (seniors and staff)
- Consider adding language around bullying to admission agreements
- Hold regular group discussions about challenges of communal living
- Provide regular employee training
- Review policies for potential revisions
- Encourage everyone to report incidents of bullying and take complaints seriously
- Review state requirements to ensure compliance

# Organizational Interventions

- Create caring communities for all seniors and staff members.
- Prohibit the use of obscene language, name calling, gossiping
- Use empathy as an antidote to bullying
- Creating environments that promotes empathy requires that:
  - All members are treated with respect and dignity
  - Everyone is held accountable and responsible for their behaviors
  - Everyone is encouraged to stand up for what is right
- Publicly acknowledge members of your community that go out of their way to make others welcome

# Organizational Interventions

Recommendations from seniors

- Offer anger management classes
- Set limits with people who bully or “pick on” others
- Hold regular meetings to promote communication
- Develop rules and expectations for behavior
- Foster partnerships between seniors and community management



# Interventions for the Bully



- Do not avoid or ignore the behaviors
- If you see something, say something and do something.
- Consistently set limits with them
- Refer them to mental health provider
- Assist them to expand their social support networks
- Identify alternative methods for individuals who bully to feel in control
- Assist them in identifying appropriate outlets and alternative methods to manage anger, frustrations, etc.
- Foster the development of positive communication skills
- Foster the development of empathy

(Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Siegel, 2007)

# Interventions for the Target

- Focus on skills development to them avoid being targeted. – assertiveness training
- Encourage and support them to stand up for their rights
- Foster their self worth and dignity and bolster self esteem
- Refer them to mediation training
- Refer them to de-escalation training
- Refer them to self-help group or 12 step program
- Encourage them to continue to report
- Encourage them to call 9-1-1
- If appropriate to do so, refer them to obtain a restraining order against the bully

# Ways Seniors can Counter Bullying

- Think twice before telling the person to just outright ignore the bully and do nothing to change it
- Teach the 5 W's of reporting bullying: who, what, when, where, and most importantly, witnesses
- Involve a family member during visiting hours to take note of the bullying in action
- Do not react to intimidation
- Stay composed and grounded
- Look at bullies in their eyes

# Ways Seniors can Counter Bullying

- Try and work it out as a first step
- Be empowered
- Seek help
- The bully wants you to react. If you don't react, they will likely lose interest.
- Don't get angry – this is what the bully wants
- Bullies look for a reaction from you and often lose interest if they aren't given the satisfaction of getting one

# Coping Strategies

- Walk away when the bully approaches you
- Concentrate on thinking about something else
- Yelling STOP and walk away
- When the bully harasses you and calls you names, look them in the eyes, LAUGH and walk away without any additional conversation

# Bullying Do's

- Just Walk Away from the Bully
- Stay Positive
- Build An Armored Shield Around You
- Be Confident



# Bullying Don'ts

- Think it's your fault. Nobody deserves to be bullied!
- Fight back or bully a person back
- Keep it to yourself and just hope the bullying will "go away." Make sure you report the bullying.
- Skip an activity or event because you're afraid of the bully
- Be afraid to tell. Telling is NOT tattling! It's the right thing to do!
- Hurt yourself. Nothing is that hopeless that it can't be resolved. As painful as bullying is, NOTHING is ever that bad that you should hurt yourself in any way.



# For Staff: Bullying Do's

- Stop Bullying on the Spot
- Intervene immediately. It is ok to get another person to help you to do this.
- Separate the individuals involved.
- Make sure everyone is safe.
- Meet any immediate medical or mental health needs.
- Stay calm. Reassure the persons involved, including bystanders.
- Model respectful behavior when you intervene.
- Get police assistance if needed.

# For Staff: Bullying Don'ts

- Don't ignore it. Don't think they will always work it out without assistance.
- Don't immediately try to sort out the facts.
- Don't force other people to say publicly what they saw.
- Don't question the person involved in front of other people.
- Don't talk to the individuals involved together, only separately.
- Don't make the individuals involved apologize or patch up relations on the spot.

# Find Out What Happened

- Keep all the involved parties separate.
- Get the story from several sources.
- Listen without blaming.
- Don't call the act "bullying" while you are trying to understand what happened.
- It may be difficult to get the whole story, especially if multiple people are involved or it involves cyberbullying. Collect all available information.

# Deontology

“Treat people the way you want to be treated.”



# Key Take Aways

- The best way to halt this behavior is to identify the cause and provide intervention
- Speak out!
- Remember there are barriers to reporting such as shame and fear of retaliation
- Staff training is critical



# The Stories – What Would You Do?

There's a clique system. It goes beyond seat saving at activities and in the dining areas. The unwanted are turned away from cafeteria tables. It has come to yelling and fist fights at times.





# The Stories – What Would You Do?

A Jewish individual in a senior housing community wakes up every morning to hate filled propaganda including swastikas drawn on his door and photos of Hitler slid under his door.





# The Stories – What Would You Do?

There is a group of women who use any excuse to gossip and spread rumors about specific women. Others within the community are beginning to believe what they say and are shunning these women.



# The Stories – What Would You Do?

At a senior high-rise, there are no assigned parking spaces, but a woman who sees herself as the queen of the parking garage will key the cars of those who crossed her or parked in what she considers to be “her parking space.”



# The Stories – What Would You Do?

Two men, both from different branches of the US military have taken it past good-natured ribbing and are squabbling and fighting. It is making others feel uncomfortable.



# Thank You

## Contact Information

Dr. Kathleen Weissberg, OTD, OTR/L, CMDCP, CDP, CFPS, CGCS  
National Director of Education -- Select Rehabilitation  
[kweissberg@selectrehab.com](mailto:kweissberg@selectrehab.com)