

Cyberbullying and LGBTQ Youth: A Deadly Combination

Brenda K. Wiederhold, PhD, MBA, BCB, BCN

PERHAPS THE GROUP AFFECTED THE MOST by cyberbullying are youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their sexual identity. In 2010, 18-year-old Tyler Clementi jumped to his death off the George Washington Bridge after his college roommate and a hall mate posted online a secretly made video of Tyler and another man kissing, then urged friends and Twitter followers to check back later for a second, never-made video.¹ In the wake of this tragedy, Tyler's death shined a spotlight on cyberbullying and its impact on LGBTQ youth.

Several studies agree that cyberbullying is more common in youth who do not identify as heterosexual, and it results in serious mental health consequences.

Earlier in 2010, before Tyler's suicide, Iowa State University researchers published the results of an online survey of 444 junior high, high school, and college students, including 350 self-identified non-heterosexuals. Fully 54% of these youth reported being victims of cyberbullying in the 30 days prior to the survey. Among the LGBT respondents, 45% reported feeling depressed as a result of being cyberbullied, and more than a quarter had suicidal thoughts.²

A larger study in 2012 analyzed the differences in prevalence rates of bullying between more than 20,000 non-heterosexual and heterosexual youth in grades 9–12 in the Boston metropolitan area. The study showed that the 1,200 LGBT youth in the sample were more than twice as likely as heterosexual youth to report cyberbullying. Regardless of sexual orientation, youth who experienced only cyberbullying were at higher risk of depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, self-injury, and suicide attempt compared with those who had only experienced school-based bullying, with LGBT youth at a significantly higher risk for these outcomes.³

Most recently, a 2013 study of 5,680 U.S. 13–18 year olds, 1,960 of whom identified as LGBT, was released by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). It found that LGBT youth use the Internet for 45 minutes a day more than their straight peers, and more than twice as many LGBT youth had a close friend they had met online. The survey found that 42% had experienced cyberbullying, compared with just 15% for their straight counterparts. Those who had experienced online and in-person bullying reported lower GPAs, lower self-esteem, and higher rates of depression.⁴

To counter this disturbing trend, a variety of organizations are dedicated to improving life for LGBTQ teens. For the gay community, resources such as these are vital:

The Trevor Project (www.thetrevorproject.org/) has been providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services

to LGBTQ teens and young adults since 1998. Services include a 24-hour national helpline as well as free, confidential, and secure chat (instant messaging) and text. Suicide prevention training and community resources are available.

PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) offers education and programs to help prevent cyberbullying at <http://community.pflag.org/cyberbullying>

GLSEN reports that there are 15 states with anti-bullying laws.⁵ In addition to research, the organization provides education and advocacy to ensure safe schools.

Resources to help prevent bullying also provide information and assistance:

CyberBullyHotline reported findings of various studies that described cyberbullying's impact on LGBTQ youth at www.cyberbullyhotline.com/blog/cyberbullying-physical-bullyings-impact-lgbtq-youth/. The site offers bullying prevention resources for teachers.

The Cyberbullying Research Center offers a fact sheet that includes what the law says about protection from sex discrimination and gender-based harassment, and suggests establishment of a school-based Gay-Straight Alliance.⁶

StopBullying.gov provides a resource page about creating a safe environment for LGBTQ youth at www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/lgbt/.

If you are a parent of a gay or lesbian teen, what can you do to keep your child safe? StaySafeOnline.org offers the following tips⁷:

- “Limit where your children post personal information...
- Avoid escalating the situation...
- Document cyberbullying...
- Report cyberbullying to the appropriate authorities...”

As reported in this journal, more research is needed into what provides a measure of resilience against the impact of cyberbullying. Such “research may help inform future models of coping with cyberbullying victimization and targeted intervention programs for victims to develop coping strategies to best counter negative impact.”⁸

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Brenda K. Wiederhold
Editor-in-Chief