



## Things You Can't Take Back — A Lesson About the Consequences of Bullying —



Phoebe Prince

There was nothing unusual about Jon Carmichael's suicide. When the 13-year-old hung himself in his family's barn on March 28, 2010, it was the final act in a storied and all-too-familiar script: Jon had been bullied to the point of suicide. His crime? He was small for his age, which led to a variety of torments; everything from being verbally abused to being stuck in a trash can. A classmate of Jon's who admits to tormenting him on occasion, says he wasn't alone: "It was most of the school who messed with Jon." Paradoxically, he adds that "I never did it because I hated him. ... the things I have done to him, I wish I could take it back." <sup>1</sup>



Jon Carmichael

What is a joke or a cheap thrill to the people doing the tormenting is all-too-often far more serious and devastating to the one being tormented. Sometimes the bullies realize how hurtful their actions are, and are simply too cold-hearted and mean-spirited to care. Other times it only sinks in just how hurtful their actions were when their target does something drastic, such as take their own life. By then it's too late. Obviously, Jon didn't take such teasing as a joke.

Jon Carmichael's case is hardly unique. In another highly publicized case, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince killed herself after being the target of relentless bullying at her school.<sup>2</sup> Her crime? Her family had just moved to the U.S. from overseas, so she was "different," and she had once dated a popular high school athlete, which apparently made other girls jealous. The non-stop bullying became so severe that she couldn't take it anymore, and she hung herself in her family home. Her little sister discovered her hanging in a stairwell by a scarf she'd been given for Christmas.

The people who bullied Phoebe not only destroyed this girl's life, but they devastated her little sister as well, who will carry a lasting scar from this traumatic event. Not to mention the rest of Phoebe's family and friends. And the stories of devastation could go on and on. Around 2,000 teens in the U.S. kill themselves each and every year.<sup>3</sup> A large number of these kids were either rejected or bullied to their breaking point by peers.



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### **More than just words**

There's a tendency among most everyone in society to discount the effects of verbal abuse, name calling, or taunting. After all, "it's just words," or so we've all been told from a very young age. The truth is, in this regard, we've all been lied to from a very young age. Words can indeed be destructive. Saying it is only a few words so it shouldn't hurt someone is like saying it's only a chainsaw, and so it shouldn't hurt if I run it across your midsection. Everyone knows words can hurt. And they can hurt someone far more than physical pain.

Brain research has shown that social hurts (name-calling or other ill treatment by others) register in the same region of the brain that handles physical pain, and can be just as excruciating.<sup>4</sup> What's more, studies have shown that among all the sources of stress a person can endure, social stress – in particular being the target of negative judgments or ridicule – is the worst type of stress. It raises levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) in the brain to higher levels, and this stress stays on the brain for longer periods of time.<sup>5</sup> Stress hormones are released in response to difficult or life-threatening situations, and aside from the psychological effects, ongoing stress is disastrous for the body. Long-term stress causes physiological damage, increasing the risk for everything from stroke to heart attack.<sup>6</sup> The fact that such taunting produces the highest stress levels is nothing to take lightly. Verbal aggression does indeed hurt people, in more ways than one.

The hurtful effects of verbal abuse can be seen in everyday life as well. Women who are victims of domestic violence, and who have suffered through both emotional and physical torment, consistently describe the verbal abuse as being far worse than the physical.<sup>7</sup> This occurs even despite the fact that in some cases they've suffered beatings so severe it resulted in hospitalization and/or broken bones. As one doctor observes, "I have seen people shredded to pieces by verbal abuse; it is worse than by beating."<sup>8</sup> There is little difference between verbal abuse and/or bullying and the wife-beater who takes out his aggressions on someone who is physically weaker. Is that really the type of person you want to be?

Here's some more food for thought: yet another study involving childhood adversity found that verbal abuse was around 7-times more likely to be linked to lasting harm than was sexual abuse.<sup>9</sup> And just like the domestic violence victims just discussed, it was even found to be more predictive of harm than physical abuse. Society may pretend otherwise, but verbal abuse is frequently more harmful than those things we put people in jail for. The only reason that verbal abuse isn't punished as harshly as physical assault or molestation ISN'T because it's any less harmful, but because it creates problems with issues of free speech. That, and it's so common that if it were illegal, everyone would be in jail.



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The teenager we quoted earlier who participated in bullying a classmate to death may not think of what he did as an assault, but his words and actions had every bit the effect that a loaded gun in the hands of a murderer might. As a young adult, you have the right to free speech and free expression, just like everyone else. But as a responsible member of society you also have the duty to exercise that right responsibly and in ways that do not intentionally injure others. Evil and malicious behavior comes in all types: physical, verbal, emotional. An attack with words is still an attack. You should think just as hard about the hurtful words you dole out as you would the decision to assault another person.

### **But He/She Started It!**

Defining who is the “bully” and who the “victim” isn't always so neat and simple. A great deal of school-yard taunting takes place when somebody does something hurtful to us, and so we try to do something hurtful back. An ongoing feud starts, and then each take turns hurting each other in their own special ways. The next thing you know, everyone involved (even people who shouldn't be involved) are engaging in despicable things that they might not otherwise do. It may not feel like bullying in the traditional sense of the word, but the results are the same.

As tempting as it might be to want to get even with someone who has hurt or offended you, there are two things you should always remember before you do something in retaliation:

A) “Getting even” will be short-lived. Because as soon as you do something mean and hurtful, your target is likely to retaliate with something mean and hurtful towards YOU...returning the favor in a brand-new fashion. They may be inclined to do something even more horrible than what you're griping about now, things you can't even imagine as of yet. The only thing revenge accomplishes is to start a never-ending cycle of conflict that drags down everyone involved.

Therefore it's best not to escalate the conflict. When you feel as though you can't live with some slight someone gave you, instead think about how much better it will be to avoid the insult/embarrassment/torment you have yet to experience...but likely will in the future after they “get even” back.



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B) It may not seem like it now, but taking the high road actually is respected. Your classmates may not speak up or say anything, but deep down inside everyone admires someone who can keep their composure and civility when others do all they can to bring you down to their level. This doesn't mean you should be a pushover, just that you should stand up for yourself without resorting to meanness or hostility in return. It's quite easy to act like squabbling children and behave in a despicable way. One needs no talent to do that; this comes naturally and is something we're all quite good at. Taking a more noble approach by treating others with compassion and respect, even when they don't return the favor or even when their behavior deserves something quite different, that's much harder to do. But like all things in life, the best paths are seldom the easiest. All things worth having require effort. And down the line, in the long-term, you'll always get the last laugh. Because eventually, the days of junior high or high school end, and everyone will grow up. (Some of us take longer to grow up than others.) When this happens, one person will always & forever remember what a jerk they were, and how much more mature and compassionate the other person was. And when they feel like a jerk and envy your civility, it's the sweetest and most rewarding "revenge" you could come by.

### **If not for consideration towards your peers, then do it for YOU**

*"If you roundly condemn others for what you consider their wrongdoing (or deficiencies) you will tend to turn the same standards on yourself and end up with considerable self-loathing. Lack of forgiveness of others breeds lack of self-forgiveness. ...To devalue others for their mistakes helps you devalue your own humanity."*

-Psychologists Dr. Albert Ellis & Robert Harper<sup>10</sup>

There's an old expression that says, 'Anger is like a hot coal. The more you hold onto it, the more you get burned.' Engaging in bullying – just like holding onto anger – is like grasping a burning hot coal. Such inherent meanness also hurts the one who dishes it out. Tormenting someone may provide a short-term ego boost, but it comes at the expense of long-term emotional health. Whatever excuses you make for it, the bottom line is that all bullying – whatever motivates it – involves one person deriving satisfaction from the humiliation and/or torment of another. This comes with a hidden cost.



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Making your self-worth and self-esteem dependant upon tearing someone down and making them 'lowlier' than you, (which is what you're doing whenever you find pleasure in someone else's torment), is a surefire path to feeling even worse about yourself. Spending your time doing something destructive (like tearing someone else down) rather than something constructive (friendship, reconciliation, kindness, etc.) will always lead to a much darker place for your own mentality. As psychologists Rusk & Rusk observe, "The human spirit thrives on compassion and respect; it withers without it. The well-being of our spirits requires we treat others with warmth and consideration. It feels wrong to act maliciously, just as it feels wrong to be treated badly." <sup>11</sup>

So as good as such taunting may seem in the moment, (those temporary feelings of satisfaction is your ego feeling good, not because of anything YOU are, but because of what inferior being you pretend someone else is); like a heroin junkie, it will ALWAYS come back to bite you in the long run. And aside from that, if you have any sort of conscience whatsoever, you'll come to regret it later, too. As one woman says, reflecting on her past schoolyard taunts: "I'm really ashamed of it now but I remember how thrilling it was to be able to reduce some person to tears. I'll feel guilty for the rest of my life for what we did to one poor fat girl who we drove out of the school." <sup>12</sup> Life-long guilt is a steep price to pay for a few momentary thrills.

The girls who bullied Phoebe landed themselves in legal trouble, and in response, they seemed almost cocky and defiant. It's all an act. I assure you, if those girls have any sort of conscience whatsoever, it will catch up with them sooner or later. It may take many years, but it will come. There is no more severe a mental prison you can put yourself in than to go through life knowing that someone else is dead because of your actions.

The kid who bullied Jon Carmichael, like many who have engaged in bullying before him, may wish he could take it back. But he can't. As he grows older and wiser, and begins to grasp the full consequences of his actions, he'll be forced to measure his personal deeds and accomplishments not just against his own life, but in relation to the life that he helped take away. And while bullying usually doesn't lead to suicide, those who participate will always come to regret their actions down the road. Don't let that be you. Don't let your future be haunted by the ghosts of things you can't take back.





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