

## **Mean People Really Aren't Nice To Be Around**

Abstract: A woman-centred psychotherapist gives some helpful information about bullying as well as tips to prevent yourself and those you love from being a victim of bullying.

I came up with the title for this article with a children's story in mind. I had just had a really yucky experience with a mean person who decided that I was to be their 'target' and after recovering from the attack, thought, "How can we teach children to avoid mean people?" Then I thought that a simple but straightforward way to warn children about "meanies" would be to read them a story entitled, "Mean People Really Aren't Nice To Be Around." I extend an open invitation to any of you who might be inclined to write such a book and spread it around...I have a feeling that adults, as well as children could greatly benefit from reading it.

Unfortunately, I was taught to be "nice" at all costs (I'm guessing you can relate!) and have fallen victim to one-too-many a "meanie" (or "bully" as they're fashionably called today) in my lifetime. But as I become older and wiser, I am proud to say that I am a victim of "meanies" no more. I have learned, through excruciating experiences, that the bumper sticker I see on so many Westfalians driving along the West Coast is indeed true: MEAN PEOPLE SUCK.

One of my most painful childhood memories dates back to the tender age of eleven when I was in grade six. As you can probably remember vividly, being a girl "tween" has got to be the worst initiation into becoming an adult known to womankind! In my grade six class, there were two "popular" girls I desperately wanted to be friends with. I would have lopped off an arm if it meant they would want me to hang around with them and be part of their little 'clique'.

Unbeknownst to me, these mean girls had an evil plan to shred the very little bit of self-esteem I had to bits and rub my face in it. To make a long story more bearable-what ended up happening is that they each pretended to be my friend on a one-on-one basis (i.e., one would be my best friend for a week and loan me her favourite pair of designer jeans and tell me which boy in our class she wouldn't mind playing 'spin the bottle' with) and then they'd switch off the next week and the other girl got to play "best friend" to me and make me feel like the most special girl in the whole wide world.

During these dreamy weeks with each one, one girl would say horrible and nasty things to me about the other one and then try to get me to say equally horrible and nasty things about her too. I was mortified the first time this happened because I was taught not to say mean things about others, but wanted their approval so badly, that I complied and said the meanest things I could think of about my other "best friend" in order to be accepted. Being a basically kind but somewhat naive girl, doing this tore me up inside because it

felt so wrong to betray a friend, but I felt like I had to do what they were doing to avoid losing them.

Well, after the two weeks of their brilliant “masterminding” were over, one day at recess, both girls dragged me by the collar into an empty hallway and cornered me. They both took turns yelling at me for saying mean and nasty things about the other one, and then punched me a few times for good measure so I got the “message”.

To this day, I’m still not clear what exactly they were trying to “teach” me, but I do know about the lasting trauma that was caused in my body and mind as a result. Even writing about this makes me shake physically. After they finished beating me up, I remember going home (a 45-minute journey involving two subway rides and a bus), entering the front door of my house, climbing the three flights of stairs up to my room, and locking myself in there for a number of days. I refused to go to school for an entire week and my mother was helpless in her attempts to find out how she could help me. I think I went into emotional shock and stayed there for days on end. It’s one of my very worst memories of growing up.

The reason I took a risk in telling you this sad tale is because as a woman-centered therapist, I have learned that we all have stories like this buried in our subconscious. We have all been bullied by mean people and have lasting scars as a result and often, it has happened more than once in our lives. The good news is that as adults, we no longer have to be the victims of “meanies” and can consciously choose to not allow bullies to harm us.

So to end this article, I’d like to leave you with five tips to help you protect yourself from mean people...

### ESTHER’S TOP FIVE TIPS TO AVOID BEING BULLIED

#### 1. Recognize the signs of a bully and avoid them at all costs.

This refers to the proverbial “red flags” to look out for when you meet someone new who you instinctively feel is not a good person to be close too. Here are some common “bully red flags”:

- They say mean and nasty things about other people and often
- They always blame others for things that go wrong in their lives
- They show an astonishing lack of compassion for other people or creatures in distress
- They never apologize for mean or nasty things they say or do

#### 2. Don’t hang out with mean people.

This sounds pretty simple, but is actually quite tricky at first if you were taught in childhood to put up with “meanies”. Here’s a good way to figure out if someone you

are hanging out with is a bully- read the “bully red flags” outlined above and stop hanging out with people who display one of more of these behaviors.

3. Stop being a victim- do your personal work.

If you have a history of being bullied, you probably learned somewhere along the way that it was normal to be victimized. IT’S NOT NORMAL! If this is a pattern for you and you find yourself constantly being victimized by bullies, I strongly suggest you go for counselling with a therapist who has solid experience in empowering women to leave abusive relationships of all kinds. Understanding the “source” of your vulnerability to bullies is the first step in giving them the old heave-ho for good.

4. Be assertive but pick your battles.

Read anything you can about developing assertiveness skills. Take assertiveness training. Familiarize yourself with your basic human rights and memorize them. Learn how to stand up for yourself and how to confront others in a healthy way. This in itself will make you less of a target for bullies. There is a caveat with this though: it is not a good idea to confront everyone who is mean to you- oftentimes, bullies are apt to attack you in return and you want to avoid being victimized even further. Most mean people are also downright abusive and engaging in a healthy confrontation with such people is not realistic, wise, or productive.

5. Help others who are being bullied.

One of the best ways I know of to practise new and healthy behaviors is to teach them to other people (being a therapist really helps me help myself!). For example, if your child comes home from school one day with a bloody nose and tells you that another child hit him in the face, I’m guessing you would have an educational talk with him about how to deal with mean bullies in the future (only after stomping down to the school and demanding that the staff there make sure that something is done to make sure the bully receives consequences for his unacceptable and violent behavior). By telling your beloved child that he doesn’t deserve to be treated badly and that he can choose to not engage with bullies, you’ll probably also be reminding yourself of the same thing. Chances are that you will practise something you preached to your child that week! Being a role model of someone who doesn’t let people push them around is the best way to teach your child to do the same.

Hope that helps!

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