Putting a Stop to Bullying

Robin P. Bonifas, PhD, MSW
October 27, 2015
Pierre, SD
Presentation Overview

- Characteristics of bullying among older adults
- The impact of bullying on older adults
- Recognizing potential bullying situations
- Promising interventions to address bullying at three key levels
Minimal research has been completed on bullying among older adults.

This presentation is based on three sources of information:

- A pilot research study in two assisted living facilities
- Practice experience working with individuals and organizations impacted by senior bullying
- Research literature on bullying among other population groups.
Who here has ever been bullied?
Unfortunately, bullying appears to occur across the lifespan
First, let’s clarify what bullying is and provide some examples so we all know what it is we are talking about…
Bullying Definition

- Intentional repetitive aggressive behavior involving an imbalance of power or strength (Hazelden Foundation, 2008).

- The necessity of repetition is questionable because one-time incidents can have significant negative impact on some individuals.

- Relational aggression is a common form of bullying among older adults: non-physical aggression intended to damage peer relationships and social connections (Hawker & Boulton, 2000)
What Does Bullying Look Like?

- Bullying includes behaviors and actions that are:
  - Verbal
  - Physical
  - Anti-social or relationship-centered

- Here are some specific examples…
Types of Bullying

- **Verbal**: name calling, teasing, insults, taunts, threats, sarcasm, or pointed jokes targeting specific individuals
- **Physical**: pushing, hitting, destroying property, or stealing
- **Anti-social**: shunning/excluding, gossiping, spreading rumors and using negative non-verbal body language (mimicking, offensive gestures)
Example Bullying Incidents

- “There’s one that tries to be the number one tough guy. [He comes up] to me [and says] ‘One of these days, I’m gonna smack you with a hammer.’”

- “He calls me “fatso”. He says, “Hey fatso.” Then as he goes down the hall...he would make oinking noises as he went to the elevator.”
28 out of 30 residents were able to describe an incident of bullying or negative social interaction that they had experienced since moving into the facility.

Most had also witnessing others being bullied or involved in similar negative social interactions.

Given a total of 134 residents in the two facilities, this implies that at least 20 percent of residents experienced one or more episodes of bullying or related behavior.
Similar results were found in Dutch assisted living facilities \((n = 121; \text{Trompetter, Scholte, \& Westerhof, 2011})\).

19 percent of residents reported experiencing some degree of relational aggression.
How Often Does Bullying Occur?

- Engaging in bullying and relationally aggressive behaviors requires a certain level of cognitive and social skills (Walker & Richardson, 1998).

- Senior environments with higher functioning residents/participants/tenants tend to have more problems with bullying.

- 50% of independent senior housing residents in a Chicago study reported experiencing relational aggression \((n = 176)\), although episodes were infrequent (Benson, 2012.).
Most Distressing Behaviors

- Loud arguments in communal areas
- Naming calling/teasing
- Gossiping
- Being bossed around
- Negotiating value differences
- Sharing scarce resources
- Being hounded for money or cigarettes
- Listening to others complain
- Experiencing physical aggression
- Witnessing psychiatric symptoms
Most Distressing Behaviors

- Note that some of the behaviors identified in my research do not meet the definition of bullying.

- Any behavior that is frightening or disturbing may be labeled as “bullying.”

- Just the perception of being bullied is also associated with emotional distress.
What types of bullying behaviors are most common in your settings?
Some common characteristics of people who bully:

- Seek to control others
- Feel reinforced by:
  - Being powerful and controlling
  - Making others feel threatened, fearful or hurt
  - Causing and observing conflict between people
- Have difficulty tolerating individual differences
- Lack empathy
- Are likely to have few positive social relationships
Who Bullies?

- At the same time, bullying among older adults also seems to be associated with loss.
  - Loss of valued roles
  - Loss of social identity
  - Loss of a sense of belonging
- Older bullies may be seeking control at a time in their life when they feel powerless.
- Some of negative behaviors may be attempts to regain a sense of equilibrium.
Factors Influencing Bullying Situations

- “I have problems accepting their problems…that’s one of the things that is hardest to deal with.”

- “They go two generations back from me and I don’t know what they’re talking about.”

- “For me, the hardest part has been living with people I have never associated with in my life.”
Gender Differences Noted

- Women tend to engage in more passive aggressive behavior like gossiping and whispering.
- Men are more likely to make negative in-your-face comments or be physically aggressive.
### Average Differences by Bullying Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bully</th>
<th>Non-bully</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive impairment</td>
<td>24.71 (3.62)</td>
<td>21.27 (5.1)</td>
<td>1.627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>6.14 (5.64)</td>
<td>5.93 (3.28)</td>
<td>.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>21.14 (8.21)</td>
<td>19.93 (6.97)</td>
<td>.359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime trauma</td>
<td><strong>5.00 (3.32)</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.33 (3.15)</strong></td>
<td><strong>-2.273</strong> ** **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < .05; n = 22**
Bullies Experience Less Lifetime Trauma

- Older individuals who bully may have had less opportunity to develop empathy toward others.
Who Gets Bullied?

- Characteristics of people who are bullied:
  - Typically have trouble defending themselves.
  - Do nothing to “cause” the bullying.
  - Often experience a sense of powerlessness because the bullying experiences are unpredictable.
Who Gets Bullied?

- **Passive Targets**
  - May be highly emotional
  - Have difficulty reading social cues
  - May be shy and insecure
  - May experience anxiety
  - May have early stage dementia
  - Have racial/ethnic, spiritual beliefs, or sexual orientations perceived as “different.”
Who Gets Bullied?

- Provocative Targets
  - Can be annoying or irritating to others
  - Quick-tempered
  - May unwittingly “egg on” bullies
  - Intrusive into others’ space
  - May have mid-stage dementia
The Impact of Bullying

- Common reactions to distressing behaviors and interaction patterns
  - Anger
  - Annoyance
  - Frustration
  - Fearfulness
  - Anxiety/tension/worry
  - Retaliation followed by shame
  - Self isolation
  - Exacerbation of mental health conditions
Example Reactions to Bullying

“\textit{It makes me burning mad!}”

“You can’t get away from that certain person, it’s hard, it’s hard. She won’t change. She does this to everybody, every day. Just aggravates the crap out of me.”

“I just have to dodge him…because he will altercation me. I have to try and avoid being harangued…if he hits me, and I fall, I’ll break a bone.”
Coping with Bullying

- Avoid contact with upsetting individual/“walk away”
- Engage in positive self-talk
- “Bite their tongue”
- Pursue individual activities
- Just “let it go” or tune it out

- Strive to see the other person’s point of view
- Offer alternatives to problematic behavior
- Work to calm others down
- Spend time with pets
- Relationship with a supportive individual
Some People Have Difficulty Coping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low distress</th>
<th>High distress</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive impairment</td>
<td>22.00 (3.64)</td>
<td>22.57 (4.99)</td>
<td>-.262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>3.50 (2.62)</td>
<td>7.42 (4.07)</td>
<td>-2.442**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>23.25 (4.20)</td>
<td>18.64 (8.14)</td>
<td>1.749*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime trauma</td>
<td>7.0 (3.50)</td>
<td>7.42 (3.63)</td>
<td>-.270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10; **p < .05; n = 22
Bullying Warning Signs

- Individuals who are being bullied may exhibit these behaviors:
  - Self isolation
  - Avoidance of specific areas or activities
  - Take long circuitous routes to get to and from communal areas
  - Vague complaints “They don’t like me” or “They won’t let me.”
  - Depressed mood
Bullying Warning Signs

- Individuals who bully their peers may exhibit these behaviors:
  - Intimidate staff
  - Often tell others what to do using a bossy style
  - Criticize others or lack empathy toward them
  - Make repeated complaints about others
    - Be aware that individuals who complain in a powerful, outraged style about others’ picking on them are often bullies themselves!
We have learned a lot about bullying among older adults…

So what do we do about it?!
Three-tiered Intervention Model

- Preventing and minimizing bullying behavior requires intervention at multiple levels:
  - Organization
  - Bully
  - Victim/Target
The goal is to create caring communities for residents and staff.

- **Caring** is feeling and exhibiting concern and empathy for others.
- **Empathy** is the capacity to recognize and share feelings that are being experienced by another.

Empathy is the best antidote to bullying!
Organizational Level Interventions

- Civility training
- “Upstander” training
- Resident recognition programs
- Pro-social activities
Civility Training: Nine Tools (Diana Benson, PSC)

- 1. Pay attention
- 2. Listen
- 3. Be inclusive
- 4. Avoid gossip
- 5. Show respect
- 6. Be agreeable
- 7. Apologize
- 8. Give constructive criticism
- 9. Take responsibility
Upstanders intervene or “stand up” for bullied individuals

Remaining silent allows bullying to flourish

Train witnesses to respond to bullying behaviors
  - Definition of bullying
  - Cycle of bullying
  - Humorous bullying role play followed by reflection
  - Bystander intervention role play followed by reflection
Cycle of Bullying

1. Bully targets victim
2. Supporters/followers participate in bullying
3. Victim and bystanders do not intervene
4. Bully is empowered
5. Bystanders don't intervene
Resident Recognition Programs
(Eleanor Barbera, PhD)

- Aims to encourage positive behaviors
- Outline behaviors worthy of acknowledgement
  - Caring
  - Welcoming
  - Upstanding
  - Encouraging
  - Helping
  - Supporting
- Award ceremonies as teachable moments
Pro-social Activities (Eleanor Barbera, PhD)

- Based on the idea that people who are busy doing good have less time for bullying
- Associated with increased self-esteem and reduced symptoms of depression
- Involves community engagement in an activity that is designed to help others outside the community:
  - Knitting hats for premature babies at the local hospital,
  - Raising money in any variety of ways for a charity,
  - Making phone calls or stuffing envelopes for a political campaign.
Interventions for Individuals who Bully

- Consistently set limits on bullying behavior
- Offer an appropriate outlet to vent frustrations
- Help them to:
  - Identify alternative methods to feel in control
  - Learn positive communication skills
  - Develop empathy
  - Expand their social network
  - Address feeling of loss
Empathy Training (Alyce November, LCSW)

- “Different like me” culture
- Web-based lessons
  - Teaches what empathy is
  - Helps develop the skills necessary for empathy
  - Encourages interactive practice of empathy skills.
Empathy Training (Alyce November, LCSW)

- Provides definition of empathy
- Introduces a thought-provoking story
- Prompts discussion that connects the story to personal feelings and experiences
- Teaches participants to recognize, understand and act appropriately in response to their own feelings
- Participants develop a sense of “walking in another’s shoes”
Interventions for Individuals who are Bullied

- Foster self worth and dignity; bolster self esteem
- Assure an underlying depression is recognized and treated
- Focus on skill development to help them avoid being victimized:
  - Standing up for one’s rights
  - Managing feelings of anger
  - Using direct communication strategies
Questions, comments, or discussion?