



# Work & Family Matters

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## Cyber Bullying



There have been many articles in the news about bullying, but a new form has entered the scene with the advent of cyber bullying. As our technology increases, so do the arenas where bullying can take place. Rather than being physically abusive, as bullying is often thought of, cyber bullying is psychologically abusive and can take many forms:

- Sending hate e-mail messages
- Forwarding e-mails without the original sender's permission
- Creating Web sites intended to humiliate the victim

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## Speaking to the Elderly

Professionals call it “elderspeak.” It is the practice of belittling speech patterns or voice inflections often used when talking to the elderly. Many doctors and other healthcare professionals use it and compound it by not speaking directly to the elderly person seeking care. They address



their comments to the elder person’s son or daughter or even grandchild accompanying them to a doctor’s visit which presumes the patient—the elder person—is unable to respond appropriately or understand what the doctor or nurse is saying to them. Store clerks often do it too.

The tone of voice and inflection in the speech is also often accompanied by speaking in a loud tone which presumes that the elder person is hard of hearing, or needs to be addressed. It is often also accompanied by calling the elder person “sweetie, dear” or even “honey.”

Generally, people who speak to the elderly in this fashion do not mean to be demeaning or rude. They may even believe that their tone and mode of address is a sign of respect to the age of the person, or that it expresses warmth to whom they are speaking. In reality, however, it is very upsetting and insulting to the elder person being addressed. New studies have even found that there are health consequences when elderly people are addressed in such a way.

Elderspeak can lead to negative images of aging which may result in a state of depression for the elder person. It has also been shown that those who have negative images of aging have worse functional health over time, including lower rates of survival. In a long-term study of 660 people over the age of 50 in a small town in Ohio that was published in 2002, it was found that those who had positive images of aging lived an average of 7.5 years longer—a bigger increase than that associated with regular exercise or not smoking. These findings held up even when accounting for differences in the basic health of the people in the study.

It has also been found that when healthcare workers use elderspeak to address people with mild to moderate dementia that patients were more aggressive and less cooperative and receptive to care. If addressed as infants, with phrases such as “good girl” or “How are we feeling today, honey,”

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## Helping Yourself Heal During the Holiday Season

Holidays are often difficult for anyone who has experienced the death of someone loved. Rather than being a time of family togetherness, sharing and thanksgiving, holidays can bring feelings of sadness, loss and emptiness.

### Love Does Not End With Death

Since love does not end with death, holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief—a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. Society encourages you to join in the holiday spirit, but all around you the sounds, sights and smells trigger memories of the one you love who has died. No simple guidelines exist that will take away the hurt you are feeling. We hope, however, the following suggestions will help you better cope with your grief during this joyful, yet painful, time of the year. As you read through this article, remember that by being tolerant and compassionate with yourself, you will continue to heal.

### Talk About Your Grief

During the holiday season, don't be afraid to express your feelings of grief. Ignoring your grief won't make the



## Cyber Bullying (Continued from page 1)

- Taking an embarrassing photo with a cell phone and posting it on the Internet
- Setting up Web site polls to vote on who is the fattest, ugliest, geekiest, or child with the worst reputation in school

These types of bullying are more common than one may think. Recently, in Michigan, a young girl forwarded a nude picture of herself taken with a cell phone to several friends. Soon the picture made the rounds of the entire school. Since the girl was a minor, the picture was considered child pornography and the girl and her friends were charged with distributing it which is a serious crime. In a school district in New Jersey, a student posted a "hit list" of intended victims on a Web site. A Massachusetts high school student was mocked on a popular teen blogging site when fellow students impersonated her and posted fictitious sexual journal entries.

While all bullying is wrong, the cyber bully has a much wider audience, and the damage inflicted by them can be more far-reaching than anyone can imagine. Also, it is easier for the bully to express malicious comments since it is being done anonymously and not face-to-face.

The victim of the cyber bully has less ability to escape from their tormenter. Simply avoiding the person doing the bullying will not work, since the cyber bully can continue to e-mail, text message, and pass on abusive comments and threats. Often, the cyber bully can remain anonymous or impersonate others and escape punishment altogether. Once something is out on the Internet, it can be impossible to completely remove it, and it will remain out there forever.

What can a parent do to help prevent cyber bullying?

- Supervise your child's use of the computer. It is recommended that a computer not be kept in a child's bedroom, but in a room that has open access to the rest of the family.
- Learn about what your child does online and what sites he/she visits.
- Encourage your child to come to you if she or he is experiencing cyber bullying, or has been a witness to it.
- Be concerned if your child spends excessive amounts of time online or hides the screen when you approach the computer.
- Teach your child empathy toward others.

How can children protect themselves against cyber bullying?

- Be careful about giving out personal information, such as e-mail addresses and phone numbers. Children should NEVER reveal an e-mail password—even to a close friend. Children occasionally have arguments or fights and an angry child can use the password to access your child's account and impersonate him or her.
- Speak to a trusted adult if they experience or witness cyber bullying.
- By not replying to bullying e-mails or instant messages.
- Being aware that anything online is not private.

some patients showed their irritation by grimacing, screaming, or simply refusing to do what was asked of them. All of the studies agree that elderspeak sends a message that the patient is incompetent and can begin a negative downward spiral for the elder person.

The study further related that elderspeak is commonly used by people in the sandwich generation—those who are taking care of elderly parents while still raising children—who also talk to their children in the same manner. There is also the problem of “familiarity,” where a healthcare worker—particularly a doctor—will address a person by their first name without first asking the person’s permission.

So, it is best to keep all of these things in mind if you have an elder relative or friend that with whom you frequently communicate. Be sure to address the elderly in the same manner as you always have, and ask their permission before addressing them by their first name if you have not done so in the past. Aging can be difficult enough without experiencing a lack of dignity.

*Adapted from an article in the New York Times, October 2008.*



## **Helping Yourself Heal During the Holiday Season**

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pain go away and talking about it openly often makes you feel better. Find caring friends and relatives who will listen-without judging you. They will help make you feel understood.

### **Be tolerant of Your Physical and Psychological Limits**

Feelings of loss will probably leave you fatigued. Your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. And lower your own expectations about being at your peak during the holiday season.

### **Eliminate Unnecessary Stress**

You may already feel stressed, so don't overextend yourself. Avoid isolating yourself, but be sure to recognize the need to have special time for yourself. Realize also that merely "keeping busy" won't distract you from your grief, but may actually increase stress and postpone the need to talk out thoughts and feelings related to your grief.

### **Be With Supportive, Comforting People**

Identify those friends and relatives who understand that the holiday season can increase your sense of loss and who will allow you to talk openly about your feelings. Find those who encourage you to be yourself and accept your feelings-both happy and sad.

### **Talk About the Person Who Has Died**

Include the person's name in your holiday conversation. If you are able to talk candidly, other people are more likely to recognize your need to remember that special person who was an important part of your life.

### **Express Your Faith**

During the holidays, you may find a renewed sense of faith or discover a new set of beliefs. Associate with people who understand and respect your need to talk about these beliefs. If your faith is important, you may want to attend a holiday service or special religious ceremony. As you approach the holidays, remember: grief is both a necessity and a privilege. It comes as a result of giving and receiving love. Don't let anyone take your grief away. Love yourself. Be patient with yourself, and allow yourself to be surrounded by loving, caring people.

*by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*