

The Impact of Bullying on Females

By David Knuckey

A new Australian study has explored the longer-term impacts of bullying on women.

The study reveals a strong association between being the victim of bullying and many health outcomes following school.

The study involved 17,015 women aged 18-23. Over 70% had been bullied. Women who had been bullied:

- were more likely to have lower levels of education
- were less likely to be studying or employed
- had more difficulty managing on their income
- were more likely to use tobacco or illicit drugs
- were more likely to be overweight, or obese and sedentary.

Even after adjusting for these factors, women who had experienced bullying were at risk of poor physical health, psychological distress, suicidal thoughts and self-harm.

Incidents of bullying in school range from 7% to 70%, depending on age and subgroup. In addition, to the direct outcomes, bullying also acts as a stressor, bringing on ill health and disorders a person is predisposed to.

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While there has been much research on the prevalence and impact of bullying at school, there has been little study of the ongoing impact of bullying. This study shows that ‘past bullying experiences continue to affect the health of victims’.

Women who had been bullied in the past:

- were more likely to report fair or poor health
- had very high levels of psychological distress
- were more likely to feel that life was not worth living
- were more likely to have attempted self-harm.

“This study shows that ‘past bullying experiences continue to affect the health of victims’.”

Recently bullied women:

- were more likely to have lower levels of education
- were less likely to be studying
- were less likely to be employed
- had more difficulty managing their income.

A key finding of the study was the high prevalence of bullying suffered by young women - particularly concerning when considering the plethora of health risks.

Therefore, the future health of victims of bullying is compromised if there is no intervention. The limited interventions currently available focus on school-aged victims of bullying by treating the immediate psychological symptoms and teaching victims to deal with future bullying interactions. Bullying intervention programs in schools produce only modest positive outcomes. Findings from the current study highlight the need for interventions for those who have already experienced bullying and may be past school age. ■



Characteristics of 18-23 year old women by experience of bullying

	Never Bullied %	Bullied in the Past %	Bullied Recently %
Age Group			
18-19 years	32.5	29.8	40.8
20-21 years	33.9	34.4	31.6
22-23	33.6	35.7	27.6
Location			
City	77.8	75.6	70.1
Inner regional	15.2	16.9	20.4
Remote	7.0	7.6	9.5
Qualifications			
Below year 12	4.8	7.7	11.3
Year 12	47.1	41.5	43.5
Certificate or diploma	20.8	27.8	30.2
University	27.3	23.0	15.0
Student status			
Not studying	29.8	34.5	38.6
Studying part time	59.0	55.5	52.5
Studying full time	11.2	10.0	8.9
Employment status			
Unemployed	18.9	22.2	26.6
Working part time	58.3	54.7	49.0
Working full time	22.8	23.1	24.4
Difficulty managing income			
None or some	82.0	75.0	62.4
Always	18.0	25.0	37.6
Relationship status			
Married	3.3	3.5	2.7
Defacto	20.0	24.8	24.8
Single	76.7	71.6	72.5

Health Risk Behaviours, general health and mental health of 18-23 year old women by experience of bullying

	Never Bullied %	Bullied in the Past %	Bullied Recently %
Risk Factors			
Smoker	13.0	19.3	27.0
Risky Drinker	37.4	34.2	36.2
Illicit Drug User	31.6	34.9	37.5
Overweight	24.6	34.4	40.7
Fair / poor health	10.3	17.0	26.8
Felt that life was not worth living			
Never	63.5	36.1	19.4
More than 12 months ago	18.6	34.1	26.0
In the last 12 months	17.9	29.8	54.6
Deliberate self-harm			
Never	75.6	51.4	34.5
More than 12 months ago	16.9	33.8	32.1
In the last 12 months	7.6	14.8	33.4
Psychological Distress			
Low	32.8	19.0	7.8
Moderate	33.9	30.8	19.1
High	22.2	29.0	31.0
Very high	11.0	21.2	42.2

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