

Are you a mobber? Have you ever made fun of people behind their backs? Spread rumors? Played practical jokes that weren't really funny and got others to join in your laughter? Have you joined in some of this behavior thinking you were right or justified, or perhaps because you didn't want to be excluded from the group? If you have, don't beat yourself up over it - but there are some things you should be aware of the one of the most confusing next time you are tempted to treat another person this way.

Mobbing has no preference for age, gender, race, or work. It can happen to anyone. It can happen to you, someone you care about, or the person sitting next to you in any environment. It may have already happened to you, or to someone you know, and you didn't understand what it was. When a mobbing is in progress, it can be situations in which you will find yourself. It is so subtle that you begin to wonder if perhaps your abusers are right and you aren't the person you always thought you were. It shatters self-esteem.

Mobbing is group bullying. It is "ganging up" on someone using the tactics of rumor, innuendo, discrediting, isolating, intimidating, and above all, making it look as if the targeted person is responsible. As is typical of many abusive situations, the perpetrators maintain that the victim "deserved it."

Mobbing is emotional abuse that results in depression, isolation, paranoia, physical and/or emotional illness, sometimes suicide, and sometimes overt acts of retaliation and aggression. At the very least, it leaves permanent scars. Many targets suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Mobbing has been a household word in German-speaking countries for many years. The original research on workplace mobbing was done in Sweden, beginning in the early 1980's, by industrial psychologist Dr. Heinz Leymann. Two years ago, my coauthors and I published a book called "Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace." After the Columbine High School incident, I developed dignity and respect communication workshops for teens and created mobbing awareness posters for schools and businesses.

The response to these efforts has been minimal. Unfortunately, people usually don't become interested in an issue until it personally affects them or threatens their immediate interests in some way. The response to potential violence is more reactive than proactive. Instead of creating awareness and promoting dignity and respect for all people, security systems and surveillance cameras are installed. Stiffer gun control laws are suggested.

What happens to school bullies and mobbers when they grow up and become workers? Do they stop that behavior, if it was successful for them, just because they are grown up now? No. They often turn to subtlety because overt bullying behavior can be construed as harassment.

The plain truth is that many people are walking around with a deep anger inside of them and don't know why. I believe that one of the reasons is

because so many have been treated like objects rather than as unique human beings for too long. When a person is treated like an object, there is the tendency to see others that way also. The target of a mobbing or bullying isn't viewed as a person, but rather as a "sort of a person" -- certainly not as much of a person as someone the perpetrator knows well or with whom they share caring feelings.

Insight and awareness play a major role in change because so many people engage in this type of behavior without thinking. Prevention includes paying attention not only to what we're doing, but also to what is going on around us. Most people don't intentionally abuse someone. When Swedish researchers explained to coworkers what had happened to the individual as a result of their actions, they were appalled that they could have participated in anything that would have damaged another human being to that extent.

Here's an example of how insight and awareness can make a difference. A woman read the mobbing book and was telling another woman in her aerobics class about it. Also in the class was a relatively new member who was rather uncoordinated and, as a result, was throwing everyone off of their rhythm. Although she was friendly, the other class members talked about her, made fun of her behind her back, and wished she'd just drop out. Suddenly one of the two chatting about mobbing said, "Oh my goodness! Are we mobbing this woman?"

It was a revelation. They decided to get to know the woman better. They found that she was an intelligent, professional person who did a lot of good work with teens. They found that, when they looked past her loud voice and uncoordinated movements, she was a person whom they could like and respect. That's what the word "respect" means as I interpret it: to "look again."

The woman is still in the class. She stands in the back row. The others have stopped their mobbing behavior simply because they became aware of what they were doing and the implications of their actions.

Most of us choose to believe that we are basically good human beings -- and we're right. The more aware we become of the fact that others are good human beings also, worthy of being treated with dignity and respect without exception, the closer we will be to recreating our world and helping to heal it. Awareness is the key.

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Mensan **Gail Pursell Elliott** is the founder of Innovations: Training with a Can-Do Attitude™, promoting dignity and respect in companies and communities nationwide. Gail also the author of training, motivation, and inspirational materials, as well as poetry.

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