



Senior Citizens and Bullying

Psychology Today defines bullying as “a distinctive pattern of harming and humiliating others.” Most bullying discussions are centered on children in school settings, largely overlooking bullying that can and does occur in many other environmental and social circles.

Bullying also occurs in senior citizen living facilities. Somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of older adults, living in senior living communities are mistreated by their peers and often this behavior goes unreported. It is finally becoming clear that bullying behaviors are not limited to kids. Some of the more prevalent bullying behaviors in senior settings include:

- Criticizing or ridiculing another person who does not meet the accepted standards for clothing, social status, religion, sexual orientation, economic background, or virtually other characteristic that is different.
- Verbal or physical abuse of another, which may include yelling, hitting, pushing, or kicking.
- Stealing or destroying property, and/or lying about another in order to assert power or authority; for example, a bully may lie to the administration regarding another’s actions in order to cast a poor light on another.
- Saving seats or reserving spaces for clique members in dining rooms, restaurants, or during outings or other events. These behaviors can appear innocent enough but can actually be quite hurtful to those outside of the clique who then may be isolated or left to dine alone.

Why does bullying occur with Seniors?

It is possible that some elder bullies may have exhibited this behavior earlier in their lifetimes, but as they age factors such as loss of independence, valued roles, relationships, and feelings of powerless in the now controlled setting may have exacerbated the need to exert control and a late-in-life round of bullying. Some other forms of exhibited bullying behaviors might include:

- Insults and belittling jokes
- Spreading unfounded rumors

- Whispering when the victim enters the room
- Invading a victim's personal space/room without permission
- Criticizing or ridiculing another's physical or mental abilities/disabilities
- Offensive gestures and facial expressions

Coping with Elder Adult Bullying

A multi-faceted approach that combines clear expectations and policies with targeted staff training and rapid interventions may help cope with this problem. Reducing the negative impacts of bullying on the victims is the primary goal.

- Set clear expectations and boundaries for behavior within the community.
- Ensure that staff and residents are aware and committed to creating and maintaining a respectful environment.
- Have ongoing discussions among staff, residents, and families, as well as formal needs assessments to identify problems early.
- Evaluate and implement changes that can "decrease the power of bullies." For example, if residents are being isolated in the dining room, eliminate reserved seating.
- Implement clear and easy reporting processes to encourage victims to report bullying, and institute a *no tolerance* policy.
- Include a standard process, such as mediation, for resolving bullying incidents when discovered.

Families of Those Being Bullied

If you have a family member you believe is being bullied, take action and report it immediately. For example, if the problem is stemming from issues from seating arrangements in dining rooms, consider joining your loved one for a meal to assess the situation. Talk to administration to find out what policies are in place and make them aware of the incident.

Coping Strategies for Those Being Bullied

Some strategies include:

- Ignore the behavior to remove the bully's perceived power.
- Share your opinion without aggressiveness or implied hostility.
- Avoid interrupting or provoking the bully.

- Maintain eye contact with the bully.
- Try to understand the bully's position or what circumstances may be contributing to the bully's behavior.

As in bullying in other age demographics, coping with senior bullying is a lengthy and sometimes complex process. Identifying coping strategies to help the victims respond with bullying and fostering appropriate behaviors of bullies is the best approach, but does take an on-going effort and careful consideration to resolve and dissolve situations.

In senior living communities, setting positive expectations and providing clear rules and policies from the beginning helps ensure a positive living environment for everyone.