

INTRODUCTION

Whether it takes the form of physical violence or verbal or online harassment, bullying can have serious and lasting effects. In this book, teens write about these effects from the perspectives of the person bullying, the bystander who witnesses the bullying, and the person who's the target.

Teens who are bullied often bear the burden on their own and end up feeling isolated and depressed. In "Feeling Different," author Isiah Van Brackle shuts himself off from his peers as a form of self-defense. The anonymous author of "Fortress of Solitude" retreats from her family after enduring years of teasing. It's only when these authors finally reach out to someone that they begin to heal.

Destiny Smith, who witnesses her friend become the target of cyberbullying in "'Smut Page' Survivor," learns that even when you're not directly involved, bullying can leave a lasting impression. As Destiny watches her friend try to recover her self-esteem and trust in others, Destiny realizes the impact of the Internet's influence when used irresponsibly.

Some teens react to bullying by becoming aggressive themselves. In "I Showed My Enemies—And Hurt My Friends, Too," author Elie Elius becomes combative

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to protect himself from bullying. It works, but he ends up alienating himself from his friends as well as his tormenters. And in “The Walking Flame,” Eric Green begins to push people away—sometimes literally—to stay safe from bullies. But now as a young adult, he sometimes finds himself overreacting to the people he cares about.

Others take this line of defense a step further, becoming bullies themselves. “Since people didn’t like me, I thought I might as well give them a reason,” writes the anonymous author of “Bad Boy Gets a Conscience.” He starts to bully others after getting picked on as a child. When he decides to give himself a personality makeover, he has to learn how to let down his guard and connect with his peers for the first time.

In “Vicious Cycles,” Miguel Ayala also writes about picking on his peers after he is tormented nearly everywhere he goes—at home, at school, and in his group home. His interview with therapist Jonathan Cohen sheds some light on why targets of bullying often become bullies themselves.

“No one likes to feel helpless,” says Cohen. Bullying someone can make a teen who has been abused or bullied feel powerful for a brief moment.

Cohen also warns that adults often underestimate how harmful bullying is. The target, the person bullying, and bystanders are all at risk for depression, and bullying can lead to more violent behavior. In the last story in

the book, “How Adults Can Help,” Miguel passes on some of Cohen’s tips for how adults can intervene and help stop bullying.

In the meantime, teens can take comfort in the words of some young writers who have experienced bullying firsthand. In their stories, targets of bullying show not only how damaging this often-overlooked form of violence can be, but also the steps they took to get help and feel better. And writers who have been the bullies or the bystanders reveal themselves in a way that will give readers a better understanding of this pattern of violence that harms target, perpetrator, and witnesses alike.

The stories in this book offer a window into many teens’ lives. You are sure to find within its pages people and experiences you can identify with and relate to. You might find that you can get more out of the book by applying what the writers have learned to your own life. The teens who wrote these stories did so because they hope that telling their stories will help readers who are facing similar challenges. They want you to know that you are not alone, and that taking specific steps can help you manage or overcome very difficult situations. They’ve done their best to be clear about the actions that worked for them so you can see if they’ll work for you.

Another way to use the book is to develop your writing skills. Each teen in this book wrote 5 to 10 drafts of his or her story before it was published. If you read the

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stories closely you'll see that the teens work to include a beginning, a middle, and an end, along with good scenes, description, dialogue, and anecdotes (little stories). To improve your writing, take a look at how these writers construct their stories. Try some of their techniques in your own writing.

If you'd like more information about the writing program at Youth Communication or want to read more teen essays, visit www.youthcomm.org.