CYBERBULLYING: SOCIAL MEDIA'S NEW SURGE

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We have all heard of devastating stories both locally and internationally of children and adults who have committed harmful acts towards themselves or others due to cyberbullying. It would however appear that this is phenomenon is on the rise especially following the tremendous growth of social media across the world. Mediums such as Facebook, Twitter, Snap Chat, and Instagram have become the new playground for cyberbullies who go about tormenting their peers in a merciless manner and to what end? Perhaps, a mere giggle just for kicks or to feel as though they are in power or simple pleasure due to pure boredom or could it even be that they are simply retaliating, as a result of being bullied themselves? Whatever the reason, there has definitely been a new surge in cyberbullying across social media platforms and this has become harmful to our society.

Cyberbullying refers to the use of electronic communication to bully a person. This typically occurs when messages of an intimidating or threatening nature are forwarded not only to the intended victim but anyone capable of receiving such messages. These messages may be in the form of text messages or images or even voice notes. They may be sent over any electronic device, such as a cell phone or an iPad or a laptop etc.

There have been many cyberbullying stories – most of them heart wrenching and some with deadly consequences. Remember the Canadian girl who attempted to commit suicide after a photo of her allegedly being sexually assaulted did the rounds online, which resulted in her being bullied? Or the Dutchman who persuaded young girls and gay men to strip nude, take images and then proceeded to blackmail them with these images if they did not meet his demands? Or the Rutgers student who took his own life after a video of him kissing another boy was streamed by a fellow student? Or the thousands of children who are forced to leave school and opt to be home schooled to avoid being cyberbullied? Or to bring it closer to home, the ongoing racial slurs that the Kolisi family face due to their interracial marriage?

Although South Africa does not have a specific statute that deals with cyberbullying, it would fall within the realm of harassment, *crimen injuria*, assault, extortion and/or defamation. This means that any victim of cyberbullying would be well within their rights to use the remedies available to them in both criminal and/or civil law. However, even with these measures being afforded to victims of cyberbullying, at times it is often too late due to the gravity of the acts that ensue.

Although you can never “bully proof” anyone, standing and watching someone be cyberbullied is certainly not an option. We should not downplay the dangers of cyberbullying, in particular, the consequences thereof. Cyberbullying must therefore be spoken about from an early age and continuously throughout anyone’s development in life, so that we are all educated on how best to eradicate this problem in our society.