

The Effectiveness of Coping Strategies Used by Cyberbullying Victims

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Introduction

- Cyberbullying is a stressful event which can lead to a variety of consequences that may range from short-term distress to long-term harm (Beran & Li, 2005; Campfield, 2006; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Sourander et al., 2010; Dehue, Bolman & Völlink, 2008; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Being exposed to such stressful situations requires the engagement of coping strategies which reduce the level of stress and prevent a repetition of the stressful event (Riebel, Jäger, & Fischer, 2009; Price & Dalgleish, 2010).
- To date, several dimensions of coping strategies were identified in the research of cyberbullying (Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers & Parris, 2011; Parris, Varjas, Meyers & Cutts, 2011; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Šléglová & Černá, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the strategies were characterized as technological coping, seeking support, reframing, retaliation, confronting the bully, avoidance, and dissociation.
- Although research of coping strategies has led to important findings regarding the frequencies of their use, much less is known about their effectiveness, especially from the point of view of the victims (Riebel, Jäger & Fisher, 2009; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Šléglová & Černá, 2011). Thus, the present study aims to examine not only which coping strategies are used most frequently by the victims of cyberbullying, but also which strategies are assessed as most effective with respect to emotional help, and which actually helped the victim stop the bullying.

Methods

Sample

The project sampled 2,092 adolescents aged 12-18 from the South Moravian region of the Czech Republic. Data collection was conducted in November 2011/ January 2012 using questionnaire administered in PC lab classes in a random sample of South Moravian schools. For the present study, only victims of cyberbullying or online harassment (N=451, 68 % girls) were analyzed. To distinguish the victims of actual cyberbullying from the victims of online harassment, the subsample of respondents who reported feeling bothered fairly or really a lot at least for several weeks (i.e. reported intensive harm, one characteristic of cyberbullying experience) was selected and labeled as "victims of cyberbullying" (N=130, 88 % girls); the rest were labeled as "victims of online harassment" (N=307; 60% girls).

Measures

Victimization: a description of cyberbullying was offered and respondents reported (using Yes/No answers) if they had a similar experience. Respondents answering positively were further asked if they A) were bothered by the incident (Not at all, A bit, Fairly, Really a lot), and B) how long did it bother them (A few minutes, A few hours, Several days, Several weeks, Several months, Longer).

Coping strategies: The victims were asked about 26 possible coping strategies which they could use when dealing with cyber victimization (see Table 1). The strategies covered the abovementioned seven dimensions of coping strategies; Yes/No/Not applicable answers were offered.

Effectiveness: When reporting the use of a strategy, respondents were asked if it helped them emotionally (to "feel better") and whether it helped stop the bullying (both with 1=Yes/0=No answers). Only strategies which could actually stop the bullying were analyzed in this regard.

Analysis

Using t-tests, the overall average numbers of applied strategies and effective strategies (which helped emotionally and stopped the bullying) were compared between victims of cyberbullying and victims of online harassment. In accordance to our expectations, victims of cyberbullying reported significantly less effective strategies (helped emotionally $t(435)=3.167, p=.002$; stopped the bullying $t(435)=3.090, p=.002$), even though no difference was found with regards to the total number of used strategies ($t(435)=-.586, p=.558$). The frequencies of single strategies among victims of cyberbullying were further analyzed. Using Phi coefficient, differences between victims of cyberbullying and victims of online harassment were tested. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Coping strategies used by cyberbullying victims

Type of strategy	Applied		Helped Emotionally		Stopped cyberbullying	
	%	Phi	%	Phi	%	Phi
I thought to myself that the person was pitiful and stupid.	88	-.05	77	-.24**		
I tried to focus on something else to avoid thinking about what happened.	86	.19**	83	-.12*		
I told someone about it.	80	.10*	91	-.01	58	.01
I thought to myself that whoever is doing this to me is not worth my time.	74	-.05	87	-.08		
I deleted the person from my contacts	72	.06	74	-.17*	44	-.35**
I started avoiding the person in real life.	69	.28**	64	-.22*	43	-.32**
I changed my settings so that the person could not contact me anymore (e.g. blocking the person, filtering).	63	.04	79	-.13	64	-.28**
I deleted the messages which troubled me.	59	-.03	82	-.04	46	-.07
I decided to ignore it.	59	-.07	73	-.13*	52	-.15*
I thought to myself that if something similar were to happen in real life, it would be much worse.	54	-.02	62	-.05		
I tried face-to-face talking about this behavior with the person or somehow persuade her or him to stop.	48	.06	61	-.13	28	-.37**
I tried talking to the person on the internet or via mobiles to persuade him or her to stop.	48	.10	59	-.12	26	-.36**
I thought to myself that such things simply happen on the internet.	45	-.19**	31	-.29**		
I changed my phone no./email/profile/nickname.	33	.17**	61	-.33**	58	-.38**
I thought to myself that he or she wouldn't do something similar to me in real life.	32	-.08	63	-.18*		
I stopped visiting the web pages where this happened.	30	.25**	90	.10	59	-.23
I simply took it lightly.	25	-.29**	59	-.41**	30	-.22*
I thought to myself that something like that could not hurt me.	24	-.21**	69	-.22*		
I searched for advice on the internet.	23	.23**	54	-.25	19	-.48**
I deleted my profile on the web pages where this happened.	18	.06	89	.12	68	-.39*
I simply ignored what happened.	16	-.26**	60	-.21*	40	-.25*
I reported this to the administrator.	16	-.06	63	-.18	56	-.21
I did something similar to the person, face-to-face (in real life).	13	-.11*	93	.10	36	-.49**
I did the same thing or something similar to the person online or via mobiles.	12	.01	86	.08	42	-.29
I thought to myself that it was only happening online, and that it wasn't actually real.	12	-.15*	62	-.29*		
I thought to myself that it was actually nothing serious.	6	-.34**	71	-.19*		

Note: Phi= differences between victims of cyberbullying and victims of online harassment; negative value of Phi indicates lower percentage among cyberbullying victims than among victims of online harassment; *= $p<.05$; **= $p<.01$

Discussion

The analysis of the effectiveness of strategies which could stop the harassment uncovered an interesting pattern. With the exception of seeking support, the most effective strategies were those which probably blocked online contact from aggressor (deleting profile, changing phone number, stopping visits of a certain page and contacting the administrator). Moreover, most of them also helped achieve better emotional state. Unfortunately, these strategies were not applied very frequently, even though the victims used them more than the victims of online harassment.

Seeking support in the form of talking to someone (peers or parents) about cyberbullying is generally common coping strategy with cyberbullying (Price & Dalgleish 2010, Šléglová & Černá, 2011); this was confirmed also among our respondents. For victims of cyberbullying, it was also extremely effective – almost all reported that telling someone about the experience helped them feel better, and it was also evaluated as helpful in stopping the bullying. It could be possible that victims received some helpful advice, yet another similar strategy - searching for advice on the internet - helped only scarcely. Thus, it is probable that talking to someone gave the victim not only advice and emotional support, but also support for facing the bully, which then stopped his or her actions.

On the other hand, attempts to talk to aggressor (both online and offline) were not assessed as very effective. Although some of victims reported that this helped them emotionally, for most this strategy did not stop the bullying. Interestingly, for victims of online harassment this strategy was much more efficient. Similar findings apply also to retaliation. Moreover, in contradiction to the general idea that such aggressive reactions often follow cybervictimization and thus stand behind overlap of cybervictim/cyberbully role, our respondents used retaliation very scarcely (which is in line with recent findings from the longitudinal study of Jose, Kljakovic, Scheib & Notter, 2012).

Even though retaliation did not stop the aggressor, most victims who used it reported that it helped them feel much better. In this regard deleting the messages, blocking the bully and seeking social support helped as well. Purposeful attempts to focus on something else and labeling the aggressor as stupid or not worth victim's effort were also beneficial. But strategies in which the victims tried to label the experience as less serious (e.g. to think to oneself that it can't hurt him or her) were not very efficient or frequent, again in contrast to the group of victims of online harassment.