Isolation can be active or passive. Once we are isolated due to an event, a dispute, an individual characteristic or simply being a member of a group, the distance from the isolation may sometimes result in social and economic exclusion. Through bullying or harassment, restrictive opportunities in employment, education and services, exclusion affects self-esteem and personal dignity, sometimes resulting in severe and tragic consequences.

In a survey on cyber bullying of 1,000 young people, one in five were victims of bullying through hate emails, threatening texts, or images posted on social networking sites.

Many young people feel that speaking out about the problem would serve no purpose and little would be done to improve their situation. The suicide by hanging of Sam Leeson in 2008, who was only 13, brought cyber bullying under the spotlight. His death was the result of being bullied physically and through social networking sites. Sam was bullied because of his interest in ‘emo’ music and style, associated with gothic and punk subcultures, often stereotyped as asymmetrical fringes and skinny black jeans.

Although some people were aware of some name calling, no one realised the extent of his isolation. Name calling and teasing is the most common form of bullying reported to Childline.

Harassment
This is the violation of a person’s dignity, the creation of a hostile, degrading, intimidating, humiliating or offensive environment.

Stereotypes
These are seen as a set of assumed characteristics about other people whose actual beliefs, habits and realities more often than not disagree with imposed assumptions. Negative assumptions and stereotyping can lead to isolation and discrimination of individuals and groups of people.
Stephen had worked for a manufacturing and sales company for over 4 years when he was promoted to area sales manager leading a small team. One of the managers who was a friend and colleague discovered that he lived in Brighton and that he had been to boarding school. From these innocuous facts stemmed remarks that were homophobic and Stephen started to be portrayed as gay.

There was a culture of inappropriate workplace banter. Stephen was a part of and engaged in, that sometimes ‘overstepped the mark’. Stephen acknowledged that he had written articles that he later apologised to colleagues for. Comments about Stephen were made regularly at sales meetings, he was called a faggot and it became culturally acceptable to make references to Stephen’s sexuality in articles published in the staff newsletter. In the July 2005 newsletter there was a further article containing homophobic remarks about Stephen which had been written by one of his colleagues who he also considered a friend. Stephen was not gay and his colleagues were aware of this. He was happily married with three children. This article may have been the tipping point for Stephen who had tolerated these sort of remarks over a long period of time.

Stephen complained that the constant innuendo had to stop, his wife and family read the staff newsletter and were both embarrassed and distressed by the situation. Stephen resigned before his complaint was investigated and told an employment tribunal that he left because it would have been untenable to stay, as he would have been regarded as the ‘school sneak’. When we are part of a group it is easy to lose our sense of individual responsibility for actions taken by the group. One of the perpetrators in this case said, as a reason for his own behaviour, that he had been sucked in to the ‘maelstrom of unchecked banter’ within the workplace. If he hadn’t been involved in the ‘maelstrom of unchecked banter’ within the workplace, if he hadn’t been involved in the ‘maelstrom of unchecked banter’ within the workplace, if he hadn’t been involved in the ‘maelstrom of unchecked banter’, his ongoing comments would not have happened. When we are part of a group it is easy to lose our sense of individual responsibility for actions taken by the group.

Stephen’s case was an example of unconscious bias and the ongoing comments resulted in conflict, with Stephen isolated and feeling that the issues couldn’t be resolved, for he would never be included or accepted by his colleagues. Stephen was a victim of harassment.

Lord Justice Sedley at the Court of Appeal said that the continuing mockery created a degrading and hostile environment and it did so on the grounds of sexual orientation.

Case Study

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