

QUESTION: *I participate in a Facebook group for polio survivors. I want to contribute honestly, but many times my response isn't what others "believe." I have felt bullied a few times in the past, and just backed off. I find that I gain from it, so I don't want to leave the group. Do you have suggestions as to how to respond in these instances?*

Response from Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD:

Unfortunately, this is a common problem in groups. Opinions and experiences that differ from what the group as a whole believes threaten one or more members, triggering an attack on the person expressing them. Members become reluctant to share. Some leave.

Have other group members been bullied when they've said things others don't "believe?" Or are they careful to stay within the parameters of accepted beliefs? The group "norm" may be total agreement and avoidance of controversy. Or members, aware that there are one or more group bullies, may have just stopped commenting.

Because social media brings out the "trolls" (e.g., those whose posts are vitriolic attacks on those with whom they disagree) as well as the "troll" in otherwise decent people, Facebook groups usually have rules that are posted as part of the group description. Groups may have a moderator who among other things takes responsibility for insuring that the rules are followed. Often the moderator posts reminders of these rules, especially after they've been violated.

A common group rule is that posts and comments should be respectful. If your group has this rule and a moderator, send her/him a private message describing your experience and requesting that s/he communicate with the bully about this. You might also request that the

moderator post a reminder of the group rules. If there are no rules or moderator, you could propose that the group consider changing this (though don't be surprised if others take this to mean you're volunteering!).

If what you get out of the group is reading what others post, remaining in the group but not commenting or posting (or only on "safe" topics) is one option. Or you could write a post about your experiences, and/or ask whether others have had the same or similar experiences and how they have handled them. Or you could post a question about how the group should respond when others have experiences or express opinions that differ from the majority.

Or you could continue to participate as you have. If you now expect to be attacked, it is important to make sure you're not coming across as apologetic or defensive, which can provoke attack or bullying. If you are attacked anyway, the best response is either ignoring it or replying with something along the lines of, "This is my experience. Please respect it." And leave it at that. Remember that the bully wants a reaction. If there is none s/he will look for more interesting victims.

Before you post anything, consider the risks and benefits of doing so. Does the opportunity to share and the positive feedback you may get about what you want to say outweigh the possibility that you will be bullied? Then post to



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the group. Will the bullying cause you to feel invalidated, even if you also receive positive responses? It might be best to post in a more supportive venue.

Different groups provide different benefits. And there is no reason to limit yourself to one.

QUESTION: *I see people on Facebook and other online groups who have a made-up name (Bracing Bill, Polio Paul), who may be pretending to be survivors. And there are groups like "Women in Braces." Some are way too interested in braces and other hardware, and it's getting creepy. On Facebook, one person with a pseudonym posts lots of pictures of braces; no one knows if s/he is a polio survivor or not (and could lie if asked). Perhaps people trust that everyone on FB is a good person. Is there anything our group can or should do?*

Response from Rhoda Olkin, PhD:

This is an excellent question but one that requires us to make some assumptions without being able to verify if our assumptions are correct. There are two possibilities here as I see it. Let's start with the benign possibility: this is a person with polio who believes that s/he is contributing to the archives by posting pictures of braces. Perhaps s/he believes that someone is collecting these, or that persons with polio are a diminishing group, one that calls for documentation.

The second possibility is less benign. The man (and it will be a man) has a sexual fetish that is attached to braces. He finds them sexually stimulating, and by posting them on Facebook he is hoping to entice similar persons to post more pictures. Sexual fetishes by themselves are generally harmless, but can be harmful to others when a person masquerades as a person with polio and others are seduced into responding as if this is accurate when it is not. The responses may feed the fetish. And those who respond may feel used, or, as you said, creepy. The other aspect here is the masquerade as a polio survivor. One would like to be able to assume that Facebook "friends" are authentic, and that sharing the

experience of polio is genuine. Obviously not friending someone with a pseudonym is one way to reduce the risk of including someone who is in it for the thrill.

Readers may be surprised to know that there is a very large group of "devs" – short for devotees, i.e., people who experience sexual attraction to very specific types of disabilities. For example, one person might be attracted to persons with a left leg amputation above the knee. Notice how specific that example is – the attraction often is that specific. Similarly, there are "wannabes" – i.e., persons who want to have a disability and who may behave and present themselves as if they do, when in fact they do not. There are hosts of internet sites related to devs and wannabes: Google "disability devs" and "disability wannabes" and you will find definitions, and many sites and listservs. Most of the sites are very upfront about what they are and who they cater to. That is very different than going to a specialized listserv (e.g., persons with polio) and masquerading.

Trust your instincts. If something feels creepy, stay away, unfriend, disengage. Any responses may only feed the person's appetite. ■

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