

UNDERSTANDING CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is damaging, disruptive, and stressful. And it can have lasting impact on you, your colleagues, practices, and the whole profession. This framework can help you better detect and understand if you're a target of cyberbullying.



What is cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying, by definition, is the use of electronic communication to bully someone, typically by sending or publicly posting messages that are intimidating or threatening in nature.

Cyberbullying can be directed toward a business, school, or practice, but also toward a specific individual. Any of us can be a target, whether we're in the exam room, the classroom, or on the front line of communication—like the reception, customer service, or billing team—and often simply for doing our jobs.

“ When technology is used to intentionally harm someone through hostile behavior... that’s cyberbullying. ”

Not all criticism is cyberbullying

There's a difference between getting a bad review and being bullied. While they don't feel good to receive, not every bad review or negative comment constitutes cyberbullying. Often, clients are making genuine attempts to communicate about what they perceive as problems. In these instances, you often can defuse the situation by inviting them to contact you offline to discuss the situation.

So how do you know when criticism turns to bullying? Key signs that a critic has crossed the line into cyberbullying are when the individual displays these behaviors:

- Spams you—sends or posts many disparaging messages a day
- Refuses to engage in reasonable discussion
- Deliberately denies factual statements
- Rallies others against you by using some form of dishonesty—most frequently by omitting important details when they retell their story

Where does cyberbullying happen?

Cyberbullying can take many forms, from insulting comments left on social media pages, to aggressive text messages, to review bombing—a concerted effort to slam a business with multiple negative reviews from different sources (or what appear to be different sources).

While cyberbullying occurs most often on social media, it also can happen in other places.

For example, some upset customers have been known to create websites devoted to spreading negativity that will pop up when someone searches for a business or a specific person's name. Another type of cyberbullying, although it's less common, involves hate messages sent directly to the person or business being targeted.

Cyberbullying often spills over into the real world as well. Attempts to stage in-person protests are, unfortunately, fairly common. And, in at least one instance, an individual purchased billboard space in a local neighborhood in order to attack a veterinarian they had taken issue with.

How do you know a crisis is brewing?

The top signs of impending crisis are a sudden influx of negative reviews or a rapid increase in negative mentions on social media. And if someone says something outright like, "I'm going to ruin you online," as they angrily walk away from a visit... that's a clear warning sign to pay close attention to online activity.

Another time to pay extra attention is whenever you have to make an announcement that may not be popular—a price increase, for example.

Is there a legal framework for addressing cyberbullying?

While there are specific laws related to cyberbullying in some states, there's not much consistency, and what does exist focuses largely on youth experiences of cyberbullying versus attacks on professionals or businesses. Tools like cease-and-desist letters might have value when addressing cyberbullying, but a full-blown lawsuit can be difficult to win because there is little to no law for a legal team to work with. If you're interested in considering legal action, consult an attorney for advice.



You don't have to face cyberbullying alone.

The AVMA has developed a suite of resources to support and guide you. Find tools to help you recognize, manage, and respond to a cyberbullying incident at avma.org/Cyberbullying.