

# WORDS THAT Wound

*Petty name-calling may seem inconsequential, but it can leave emotional bruises that last for years, if not a lifetime*

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**W**e often associate name-calling as a product of youthful belligerence, something usually restricted to the playground that, as we age, we leave behind - but if the state of our current political and cultural landscape is anything to judge by, this couldn't be further from the truth. As society becomes increasingly divided and technology has emboldened us to hurl abuse at one another from behind the anonymity of a screen, it has become more important than ever to recognise the damage that such behaviour can inflict on others. Name-calling, after all, is not just a practice reserved for narcissists and bullies - it can seep into the dynamics of any of our interpersonal relationships, whether that's familial, romantic or professional.

Name-calling is often brushed off as 'just words' or mild teasing instead of what it really is - a form of verbal abuse that can

cause deep psychological wounds. We only have to look at the countless cases of bullycide amongst young people, as well as the tragic deaths of high-profile celebrities such as the British television presenter Caroline Flack, to understand the power that words can have over us.

Verbal abuse is defined as the use of language that hurts, belittles, threatens or manipulates another person. It can be overt, obvious name-calling that involves direct insults, slurs or derogatory labels that target someone's personal traits or vulnerabilities, such as their appearance or intelligence. It can also be subtler, more insidious forms of name-calling that slowly chip away at a person's self-esteem and confidence over time - the quiet jabs disguised as humour, the use of a condescending pet name, or being repeatedly spoken down to with passive-aggressive comments. In each case, the goal of the perpetrator is usually to hurt, embarrass or control the other person.

Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between name-calling and 'harmless banter' - especially when personal insults are hidden behind the guise of being a joke and the person on the receiving end is made to feel as if they're being too sensitive or overreacting if they take offense to it. The key difference is usually intent. Friendly banter is meant to amuse everyone involved; name-calling, however, is used to assert power or superiority over another.

### **The psychological impact of name-calling**

While anyone can be a victim of name-calling, some may be more affected by it than others. "Those who have a shy temperament, lack self-confidence, or tend to avoid confrontation are vulnerable to social aggression," says Dr Brandi Niemier, a behavioural scientist. "How the offending behaviour will affect the victim long-term largely depends on the support systems in the other areas of the person's life, not to mention their genetically predisposed temperament and mood."

**“NAME-CALLING CAN CAUSE DEEP PSYCHOLOGICAL WOUNDS”**

One of the most damaging effects of prolonged name-calling is its ability to warp a person's sense of self. When negative labels are repeated often enough, they can become internalised. Over time, the individual may adopt these labels as part of their self-concept. A child who is frequently called a troublemaker at school or at home may come to believe

that they are inherently bad and act out accordingly, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Meanwhile, a teenager who is constantly ridiculed for their weight may develop body dysmorphia. An adult who is frequently made to feel as if they are incompetent may stop speaking up in meetings and avoid any further opportunities for professional development.

These labels can become internal scripts that become embedded as core beliefs about oneself, and which continue to perpetuate the hurtful comments long after they were uttered. This results in a fractured self-image where victims may struggle to see themselves realistically, especially when their identity has been shaped by cruelty. This internalisation



## STOPPING A NAME-CALLING HABIT

Is name-calling an unpleasant trait of yours that you would like to change? Here is how to put a stop to it, once and for all.

### UNDERSTAND WHY YOU NAME-CALL

Ask yourself, 'When do I tend to use hurtful language? What triggers this behaviour? Is it a way to gain status, be funny or to deflect from my own insecurities?'

### PAUSE BEFORE YOU SPEAK

One of the most effective ways to stop name-calling is to create a pause between your emotions and your words. In moments of conflict, take a few deep breaths and count to ten. Ask yourself, 'Is what I'm about to say kind, necessary or helpful?'

### USE 'I' STATEMENTS

Focus on specific behaviours rather than personal attacks. Instead of labelling someone ('You're so lazy'), try, 'I feel frustrated when chores are left undone'. This shifts the focus from judgment to communication.

### SURROUND YOURSELF WITH ROLE MODELS

Spend time with people who encourage communication based on respect rather than ridicule. Notice how they handle conflicts and express emotions.

### SEEK SUPPORT IF NEEDED

If your name-calling habit is entrenched in deeper emotional issues like anger or envy, consider talking to a therapist to unpack those feelings.



## “PROLONGED NAME-CALLING CAN BE ESPECIALLY DAMAGING TO CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS”

process can cause lifelong struggles with self-acceptance, affecting everything from career choices to personal relationships. A distorted self-perception, coupled with a crushed self-esteem, can restrict someone from fulfilling their full potential because they struggle to separate their self-worth from how others have defined them.

Exposure to prolonged name-calling can be especially damaging to children and teenagers when their sense of identity and self-image is still forming. Harsh words from peers, authority figures or parents can imprint themselves as lasting beliefs about who the child believes themselves to be and how they expect to be treated by others.

'If a child's sense of worth is challenged in that it negates them in being special in any way, it hurts a lot,' says Dr Linda Blair, clinical psychologist and a Chartered Member of the British Psychological Society. 'By the time we grow up, most of us have about 20-30 different identities and labels to fall back on, but when we are young, we are still searching for our labels.'

When name-calling is persistent, it can contribute to feelings of sadness, hopelessness and emotional numbness - all classic hallmarks of depression. These feelings often build up quietly over time, particularly when the victim feels as if they have no escape or support system in place.

Victims may absorb the negativity directed towards them, carrying around an inherent sense of shame and continuing to ruminate on what was said. They may become extra sensitive to any perceived rejection or criticism or withdraw from activities that once brought them joy.

### **The behavioural impact of name-calling**

Name-calling not only leaves deep emotional scars but can also be the fuel behind various strategies and behaviours that people might adopt to cope with such injuries.

Some victims of name-calling may worry about being judged or treated negatively

in social interactions, so they choose to isolate themselves to avoid further abuse. They may develop a distrust of others or doubt their sense of safety and inclusivity within social settings. Withdrawal can result in a breakdown in social confidence, where the development of healthy communication skills is stifled, and it becomes a challenge to form and maintain relationships. It can also further reinforce any beliefs that they are unlikeable or unworthy of love. 'Avoiding social situations can make you feel worse because belonging to a social group and having friends and a social identity is key to feeling psychologically well,' says Dr Blair.

Alternatively, some people may develop overcompensating behaviours where they constantly seek external validation in a futile attempt to avoid further ridicule or criticism. This might manifest in people-pleasing and perfectionistic tendencies, where the affected individuals may struggle to say no to others or reinforce boundaries. These kinds of behaviours are rooted in insecurity, due to an extreme fear of being judged negatively or as a means of 'proving' their value to others.

Others may learn to defend themselves against further name-calling by lashing out or adopting an aggressive demeanour as a means of self-protection. They may even become bullies themselves as a way of regaining control or social dominance. 'When we are hurt, we try to be what hurt us because then we feel safer,' says Dr Blair. 'When we name-call, we are trying to offload our own insecurities, and that never works. It may work for a while, but then you need to do it again because it's not a permanent fix.'

Victims of name-calling may also turn to self-destructive behaviours as a way of dealing with emotional distress. They may engage in self-harm, substance abuse, disordered eating, impulsivity or even suicidal ideation as a means of escape, numbing themselves or self-punishment. This is particularly common among teens and young adults, who may lack effective coping methods for managing painful emotions, such as anger or frustration, in a healthy way.

#### **The physical impact of name-calling**

The internalised pain from name-calling doesn't just disappear - it lingers in the body and can wear it down over time. The body and mind are deeply connected, and when a person is in distress, the body responds accordingly. When someone is repeatedly called names, the body perceives this as a threat, which triggers the fight-or-flight response, the body's built-in survival mechanism. The body then

releases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, which increase heart rate, tense muscles and prepare the body to defend itself. Although useful, being in this state far too often can cause long-term physical strain.

Being on the receiving end of name-calling can result in psychosomatic symptoms, such as disrupted sleep and eating patterns, headaches, digestive issues, muscle tension and fatigue. Prolonged exposure to stressful experiences like verbal abuse can weaken the immune system, making the body more vulnerable to infections and illnesses, as well as slower recovery times. It can also increase the risk of developing chronic conditions, such as heart disease and autoimmune disorders. These conditions may not appear until years after the abuse has stopped, but they often stem from years of dealing with stress and internalised trauma.

Words, for better or for worse, carry power. They can be tools for connection or wielded as weapons. Choose wisely. ■



## REMEDYING THE DAMAGE OF CUTTING REMARKS

### GET PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Talk therapy, trauma-informed counselling, and support groups can help you to explore the long-term impact of verbal abuse. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is especially effective in addressing negative self-talk, rebuilding self-esteem and learning effective coping skills. Remember, you don't have to do the healing work alone.

### SEPARATE YOUR WORTH FROM OTHERS' OPINIONS

You are not the sum of what others have called you. Your identity belongs to you - not to your bullies, abusers or critics. Healing starts when you begin rejecting the names you were never meant to carry.

### CHALLENGE THE LABELS

Ask yourself what evidence you have that contradicts the messages you have internalised. For example, if you were repeatedly told you were 'stupid', remind yourself of your achievements, your problem-solving skills or the areas in which you excel.

### REBUILD SELF-WORTH

Work on reconnecting with your strengths, talents and positive qualities. Regularly practise saying positive affirmations such as, 'I deserve respect', or 'I am enough', to wire in new ways of seeing yourself.

### LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Prioritise activities that boost feelings of self-worth, such as exercise, self-care, hobbies, volunteering and investing in your personal development.