

CYBERBULLYING – CASE STUDY: CHARLIE

Charlie was a popular 15 year old boy. He played rugby, had lots of friends both on and offline – on Facebook he had over 1000 “friends” and had a busy and active life, a real presence on social media sites as well as on the pitch.

In April 2012, Charlie broke his ankle (during a rugby match), he was devastated (gutted in his words) to miss the final games of the season. He also says that his absence was the reason for the school not bringing home the trophy! Charlie spent most of the holiday sitting in front of the TV eating chocolates and crisps and not doing any exercise, his own words...he was aware that he had started to put weight on and acknowledged that he knew that his friends would mention this and that there would be some “banter” when he went back to school. This wasn’t a problem for Charlie, he knew it would happen and had been involved in similar conversations with friends in the past, all in good humour.

Charlie was right in his prediction, he went back to school and there were the usual smart comments, lots of banter, just from his friends and all in good humour, nothing malicious in any way at all. Charlie’s best mate also left a message on Facebook “good to see you back Charlie, sorry you’ve still got the plaster on, but at least now we know who ate all the pies”. Despite this reference to his weight, Charlie took this in good humour and said he didn’t take offence, knowing this was from his best mate and was just carrying on the joke/banter that was started in class.

What did surprise Charlie was the number of people who then “liked” the comment on Facebook. Within hours, over 120 people had clicked the button. Some also left their own messages, again nothing really offensive, but some which perhaps went closer to the limits – e.g. you were always ugly Charlie, but now you’re fat and ugly!

Over the next couple of days Charlie became obsessive with the comments on Facebook, checking his newsfeed whenever he was able to. His friends now acknowledge that he did become very quiet and withdrawn, but as everyone was busy with exams, sports and other things, no one really noticed or did anything at the time.

Charlie self-harmed four days after the first comment on Facebook. It appears that this was a cry for help, but from a boy who was usually very confident, very popular and the “life and soul of the party” to quote teachers at the school.

Charlie explained that he wasn’t really sure why he suddenly felt the need to do what he did, but he said that when he saw all of the comments and perhaps more importantly the “likes”, he began to wonder if perhaps people were laughing at him behind his back. He also talked about his frustration with the broken ankle that was taking longer to mend than he had originally been told. This was not easy for him as a keen sportsman, having to watch from the sidelines as his friends and peers took part in various athletics competitions and sporting events etc. something which Charlie loved and was good at. He was also conscious about his weight and becoming concerned that it would be problematic to shift. The large number of comments online only served to feed his anxiety and lead him to think that perhaps it was an issue and that although none of his friends had said anything to his face, perhaps they were making fun of him. The popular lively boy was now fearful that he was the object of jokes and ridicule from his mates. His obsession with checking online to see if anything had been added meant that he re-visited the comments many times each day and by his own admission each time he did he was looking for any hidden meaning. Some friends apparently did ask him if everything was okay, Charlie told them all was well and said he had surprised himself at how convincing he was in his responses.

Charlie was asked why he hadn't gone to try and get some help and support when he realized how he was feeling. He had supportive parents, supportive teachers and supportive friends, so why hadn't he gone and said how he felt. His response to this was to refer back to the comments made online and point out that any one of the comments taken alone was really not something that was meant to cause offence, he knew all of the people who had made comments and in most cases they were simply extensions of the conversations and the banter which had taken place offline. Charlie felt that if he spoke about how he felt, people would tell him to "man up", "stop being daft" or to "get over yourself". He felt that there was no way he could suggest he had a problem with this without inviting real criticism and calls for him to "stop being so soft and sensitive". Consequently Charlie told no one and ended up cutting his wrists in order to demonstrate how difficult he was finding everything.

He was given help and support and is doing well now – everyone was shocked at how quickly this happened and also at how powerless they had all been to recognise what was happening. His friends were devastated that they had played a part in everything albeit an unwitting part. His best friend who posted the initial comment was inconsolable and felt completely to blame. It was pointed out to him that Charlie actually hadn't taken offence to anything he had written, he knew it was a joke and did take it in the way it was intended. However his response to this was that if he hadn't written the initial comment, then perhaps no one else would have thought to make their own comments, 120 people wouldn't have had a comment to "like".

A very difficult situation, but one from which we can learn a great deal. This clearly demonstrates the power of social media and shows how quickly things can go wrong.

Were Charlie's friends bullies? Following discussions with them, they were all clear that banter is great, but it is not something that should happen online.

Clearly we can all react in very different ways to things that are said online. It may be posted as a joke, but without the benefit of facial expressions, body language and some visual cues, things can be interpreted in very different ways, even by people who know each other very well..

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