



Australian Government



Years 8 and above

Am I just sensitive, or is it bullying?

It is very common to question your own experiences around bullying and other harmful behaviours. You might find yourself wondering: 'Am I just overreacting?' 'Am I being too sensitive?' or 'Am I making a big deal out of nothing?'

When harmful behaviour is quiet, hidden or presented as a joke, it is easy to dismiss. This resource is designed to help you notice what is happening and how it makes you feel. Your comfort and safety matter, even when the harm may not seem obvious or serious.

Read the following scenarios and the honest reframes that go with each one.

Scenario 1: The slow fade (social exclusion and harm to relationships)

For the past few weeks, you've noticed that your usual group seems to know about plans before you do. You see them talking quietly at lunch, and when you walk up, the conversation shifts. You were not invited to a movie catch-up over the weekend. When you asked about it, someone just said, 'Oh, we thought you were busy.'

Nothing loud or aggressive has happened. You keep telling yourself that you are being paranoid and everyone is just busy with exams.

'Sometimes you don't realise you're being excluded until you notice you've stopped speaking.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

The reality

Exclusion is harmful, regardless of whether anyone is being openly mean. You do not need a single, dramatic fight to prove that your feelings are hurt. What matters most is the ongoing impact the behaviour is having on you, not whether other people think it's not serious enough.

Scenario 2: 'It's just a joke' (subtle put-downs and public undermining)

A classmate constantly makes comments about how long it takes you to finish your work or mocks your haircut. They do it in front of others, always laughing loudly, which makes the rest of the group laugh along too. You feel a knot in your stomach every time they open their mouth. When you finally tell them to stop, they roll their eyes and say, 'Far out, learn to take a joke. You're so sensitive.'

Scenario 3: The 'ghosted' screen (online exclusion and digital harm)

You are part of a group text thread for a school project, but you notice the other members are replying to your questions incredibly slowly. Later, you find out through a casual comment that they have started a separate group text without you. They are making decisions there and occasionally sharing screenshots of your messages to mock them. Because no one has said anything to your face at school, you feel unsure if you have a right to be upset.

The reality

When a comment is funny to everyone except the person it is directed at, it is not a joke. People often disguise mean comments as jokes to get away with hurting others in public. Calling something 'banter' doesn't make it less harmful.

The reality

Online and digital harm are real harm. The eSafety Commissioner website states that hidden online behaviours are very stressful and can feel hard to escape. This includes things like being excluded from digital groups or having private messages shared without consent. It happening on a screen rather than face-to-face doesn't make the impact on you any less real.

'I knew I needed help when I could feel the problems weighing down my chest. If you wouldn't want a friend carrying it alone, you probably shouldn't have to carry it alone either.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 18,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Reflection tool

Think about your experiences over the last few weeks and the examples and how they apply to you. You do not need to tick a specific number of boxes for your experience to be real or important. This is a space to notice any harm in your life right now and how it may be affecting you.

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| ☐ The same person or group has done or said something that hurt my feelings and maybe more than once. | ☐ I am avoiding places at school (like certain corridors or areas of the oval) to avoid encountering specific people. |
| ☐ I have been left out of plans, group texts or lunchtime chats in a way that feels targeted at me. | ☐ I keep telling myself that I am being 'too dramatic,' but the hurt or anxious feeling keeps coming back anyway. |
| ☐ I feel like I have to change how I act, what I wear or what I say around certain people. | ☐ Something has happened to me that I haven't told anyone about because I am worried they will tell me it's not serious enough. |
| ☐ Comments or banter directed at me leave me feeling sick or uncomfortable rather than amused. | ☐ I feel lonely at school, like I am the only person dealing with this exact situation. |
| ☐ Someone has shared a photo, video or screenshot of me or my messages without my permission. | ☐ I have been targeted with negative comments, jokes or behaviours related to my race, culture, religion, sexuality, disability or gender. |
| ☐ I have started feeling anxious, stressed or a sense of dread when waking up knowing I'll be around certain people and peers. | |

What do these results mean?

If something on this list feels familiar, it is worth taking your experiences seriously. You don't need to have the situation perfectly figured out. And you don't need to wait until things get worse before you talk about it or decide to take action.

If you are not ready to tell an adult: You can look at the 'Support systems' resource to help you work out who you might want to talk to when you feel ready.

You can report harmful behaviour online to **eSafety** at esafety.gov.au/report.

If you have been bullied or harmed because of who you are, such as your race, gender, disability or any other identity-based factor, go to the **Australian Human Rights Commission** at humanrights.gov.au to learn about your rights and find support.

Connected resources

- ◉ Support systems
- ◉ Identity-based harm

Where to get more help

If you need further support, help is available:

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au. Free, confidential counselling for bullying and other harmful behaviours, school issues, online harm and wellbeing, available 24/7.

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au. Mental health support for stress, anxiety or overwhelm, available 24/7.

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au. Crisis support and counselling if things feel overwhelming, available 24/7.

Dolly's Dream Bullying Support Line: 13 36 55 (13 DOLLY) or dollysdream.org.au. Counselling and guidance for children and young people experiencing bullying and other harmful behaviour, available 24/7.

headspace/ehespace: 1800 650 890 or headspace.org.au. Mental health, wellbeing and early intervention support, available 9 am–1 am daily.

1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732 or 1800respect.org.au. Sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling line for anyone who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault, available 24/7.

13YARN: 13 92 76 or 13yarn.org.au. Culturally safe 24/7 support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

QLife (LGBTIQA+ young people): 1800 184 527 or qlife.org.au. Free, anonymous peer support and referral service, available 3 pm–9 pm daily.

eSafety Commissioner: esafety.gov.au. Report cyberbullying, get advice and request content removal support.

Australian Human Rights Commission: humanrights.gov.au. Support for cases involving discriminatory harm. Reports can be made via their website or by emailing infoservice@humanrights.gov.au.

State, territory and non-government education sectors will reflect the expectations of the National Framework for Addressing Bullying in Australian schools in their policies and procedures by Term 1 2027. This includes making reasonable efforts to initiate a response to bullying and harmful behaviour within two school days, recognising that further time may be required to fully address the issue. By Term 1 2027, all schools will also publish or link to policies and procedures that align with the National Framework (or equivalent contemporary jurisdiction specific Frameworks) and their local policies and school context.