

If you're a kid or teen being ridiculed/bullied, here's sympathy and advice from someone who survived the same torture.

Time to Tell 'Em Off! A Pocket Guide to Overcoming Peer Ridicule

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## **Chapter 2**

### ***Why Me? The Reasons Kids Make Fun of You***

Being ridiculed is a very upsetting experience. Your heart beats fast as if to tell you your body is ready to run from the attack. You feel hurt and angry, but the anger is frustrating and useless because you are too afraid of what the bullies will do if you use your anger to defend yourself. This fear is understandable because most likely you are outnumbered. If you hardly know your attackers and you had a fairly good self-image before they started picking

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you apart, you also feel bewildered. They don't even know you. You've done nothing to them. Why should they hate you?

Inevitably you ask yourself, "Why me? What is so wrong with me that I deserve this terrible treatment?" Then you come up with a list of all your flaws, usually many of them physical. After obsessing over these flaws for a while, you conclude that you're worthless.

Hold on right there! When a person is robbed, does he think, "Oh, this happened to me because I'm such a lowly, unimportant person and the thief is so much better than I am"? No way does he think that, and neither should you. As I said before, being picked on is the same as being robbed. Whether it's your money or your self-

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confidence they're stealing, you're still dealing with low-life thugs.

So let me assure you now: there is nothing wrong with you. You may protest, "But you don't know how fat I am" or "You haven't seen how ugly I look with my braces." Well, without even knowing you, I'm still certain there is nothing wrong with you. There is only what you *believe* to be wrong with you. That said, let's take a look at what the bullies may *believe* to be wrong with you...and what is actually wrong with *them*.

## **The Way You Look**

Each person looks different in some way from everyone else. This difference is good. It makes you unique, an

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original creation not exactly like any other in the world.

Unfortunately, in the social war zone of school, many of us would welcome the camouflage of sameness to avoid being attacked. The lucky kids who grow smoothly—whose noses, for example, don't grow before their faces do—are able to fit in by wearing the right clothes. Sometimes the right clothes are the ones that everybody else is wearing. Sometimes the right clothes are the ones that rebel in a cool way against what other people are wearing. Whichever the case, some kids are protected from attack because nothing about them stands out enough for the bullies to take notice.

However, if your appearance does not blend into the crowd, it is possible that the kids who are socially immature will

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point out and laugh about your differences. Notice that I say differences, not flaws. Please do not let them trick you into believing that your differences are flaws. If you do, you're letting the thieves steal your stuff. Kids may judge you to be too large, too skinny, too tall, too short, or too whatever. Maybe they decide they are bothered by your glasses, your braces, your skin color, your face, your body...who knows? The point is you don't look ordinary to them.

Well, congratulations! You also don't look plain and boring. Perhaps you even stand out because you are good-looking. I'm not kidding! Whether attractive people become part of the popular crowd or social outcasts depends mostly on how they act, not how they look. The same goes for people who are not thought of as physically

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attractive. If you don't believe me, answer this: Have you ever seen a popular cheerleader who was—how can I put it?—not thin and not pretty?

I've seen several.

### **The Way You Act**

In my experience, the way you act has much more to do with why you are being picked on than how you look. This is good news because there are some things about the way you look that you just can't change, but you *can* change the way you act!

I know this may be hard for you to face, but people who are ridiculed usually act insecure—even before the attacks start. When you act unsure of

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yourself, it's like letting the robbers know that you're nervous because you don't have a home security system. You're showing them that you are vulnerable and that, if they pick on you, they will hurt you. You're giving off the message that you believe you're not as good (worthy, smart, attractive, whatever) as they are. Even if you are just as good as—or better than—they are, if you don't believe it, why should they? They would much rather believe that they are better than you. This makes them feel good. It's the sad truth about human nature.

People don't like to see others who are smarter, cuter, richer, happier, more talented, or better off than they are in any way. They like to find or imagine things that are wrong with other people to make themselves feel better. Just look at the success of the tab-



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roids. These magazines are constantly telling us one message: the stars may be rich, beautiful, and famous, but they're not better off than you are! They're addicted to drugs and alcohol. They're going through painful divorces. They're battling deadly diseases. They're getting older. They're gaining weight. They were kidnapped by aliens and have been doing bad movies ever since.

The kids who make fun of you are the same people who will someday buy these magazines to feel better about their sad lives.

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## **Real-Life Examples: The Link Between Ridicule and the Way You Look and Act**

Let me give you some real-life examples of how the way you look and act can affect the way others treat you.

When I was in kindergarten, before anyone started picking on me, I was a cute kid. The awkward stage hadn't set in yet, and I was pretty. I didn't think I was pretty, though. I also felt nervous around the other kids, so I acted very shy. There was a girl on my school bus who was not pretty at all, but she started to make fun of me, calling me ugly every day. At the time I couldn't understand why she was treating me so badly. Now I know that she must have been jealous of me because I was cute. So how could an unattractive person get away with picking on an attractive

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person? Well, I acted so shy that she realized she could easily put me down and raise herself up. She was right.

Things got worse for me after that. During my pre-teen and early teenage years, my body and face grew in the most awkward way. I got very tall and very thin, without any curves at all. If I'd been a plant, I would have been a stem without any flowers or even any leaves. My cute little nose grew big, but the rest of my face stayed practically as skinny as my long giraffe neck. Luckily, I still had nice eyes, but by fifth grade these last good features were hidden behind the glare of large, square glasses.

A week before the beginning of seventh grade, my orthodontist put the final touches on my embarrassing looks by cementing braces to every tooth I

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had. The worst part of it was the “palatal expanding device” he put across the roof of my mouth. The “palatal expanding device” was a metal bar that basically widened my upper jaw while narrowing my circle of friends. The bar got in the way of talking and eating. It made me talk funny. It made me rush to the restroom after each meal to brush my teeth and remove the food stuck between the bar and the roof of my mouth. I had to wear the bar for a whole miserable year, during which time I avoided talking. The braces didn’t come off until just before ninth grade.

Of course, it was easy for kids to make fun of me all through those years because I agreed that I was ugly, and I felt terrible about myself. Kids even picked on me for features that hadn’t occurred to me to feel self-conscious

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about. For example, two older boys I didn't know (and who were *not* good-looking themselves) yelled out, "Seen the ghost?" and laughed and pointed at me every time they passed me in the hallways. That was how I realized that I had very fair skin. It seemed like everyone thought there was something wrong with me. I became more and more shy and unfriendly because I assumed nobody liked me, and I focused all my attention on my studies, where I excelled.

I thought the mockery would stop when I started high school. My braces were taken off to reveal lovely, straight teeth, and my glasses were replaced with contacts. My face and body were starting to fill out, too. I was definitely beginning to look pretty again. But the irony was that the worst ridicule of all was still ahead of me.

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Throughout middle school—and even some time before that, I think—my siblings and I had been the target of ridicule by a group of obnoxious, mostly older boys who sat at the back of our school bus. Every day during our ride home, our ears would prickle as we heard our names yelled out by these boys in mocking tones. They said nasty things about us and threw chalk at us.

As always, the abuse puzzled and angered me. These jerks didn't even know us. They weren't in any of my classes. Heck, they weren't even in my grade! Plus they were not good-looking and not intelligent. They were the types who barely passed. They didn't have anything to brag about themselves, so how could they dare to put anyone else down?

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Well, my siblings and I were all quiet and studious. Also, in their opinion, we were goody-goodies. But the main reason they targeted us was because we were meek. We hardly ever tried to defend ourselves, and no one else—including the bus driver—told them to stop, so they got away with making fun of us. By ninth grade they were still harassing us on the bus, but unlike in past years, that year several of them also turned up in one of my classes.

I was in honors classes for all subjects except math. My math class was a combination of freshmen who were at the average math level and upper-classmen who were at the below-average level. So that's how I got stuck with the older boys from the bus. Added to that was another longtime enemy: one of the "Seen the ghost?" guys. The rest of my classmates prob-

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ably would not have made fun of me ordinarily, but in that bizarre situation, where the older boys were so bold in their persecution of me and yet went unpunished, everyone else felt encouraged to join in, or at least to laugh.

What happened to me in that classroom each day was madness. I sat hunched over in my assigned seat in the middle of the room, wishing—practically praying—I could disappear, while insults came from in front, behind, and either side of me. Basically, all the kids in the class entertained themselves the entire period by ridiculing me. The teacher was an old lady who must have been losing her hearing and her sight because, to my disbelief, she never once tried to discipline the kids when they spoke out of turn to humiliate me. I grew to resent and hate her just as much as I did my classmates.



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What baffled me the most, though, was the class's unanimous choice of me as the victim. There was another girl in the class who was just as shy and unfriendly as I was. In fact, I don't remember her ever uttering a word. She seemed insecure, and she was plain and not pretty at all. Her personality was unreadable because her face usually wore no expression. However, she did once in a while smile or laugh quietly when the other kids made fun of me.

I was prettier than this girl. I was sure of it. I knew I wasn't ugly anymore, so why were they telling me every day that I was? What was wrong with me that wasn't wrong with this other quiet girl? Why didn't they target *her*?

Well, now I realize there were several reasons. First, her plain looks allowed her to blend in. My looks, though no

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longer unattractive, were still unusual enough to make me stand out. Second, she was an upperclassman at the below-average math level, like many of the others. I was a studious freshman who got the highest grades in the class. Third, it was true that she acted insecure, but I acted more insecure. Even though I was pretty, I still acted like I was ugly. The years of peer ridicule had damaged me psychologically. I had changed on the outside but not on the inside. I still did not have confidence. Whenever I did try to act self-confident, I think kids viewed it as snobbery because I was so shy and I got straight A's. Of course, the constant abuse in math class made me feel and act more insecure, so the vicious cycle continued.

Looking back on that year, I am amazed and angered at how the kids in

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that class made me feel so bad about myself and so depressed that I actually longed to die. It's obvious to me now that not one of those kids was better than I was. The boys from the bus and the "Seen the ghost?" guy were all, to be frank, quite lacking in looks and intelligence. As for the rest of them, they were normal enough in looks and intelligence, but like the ringleaders they lacked good character, something much more important.

Which brings me to the next section....

### **What's Wrong With *Them***

There is always something wrong with the people who are doing the ridiculing. They leave you wondering, "What's wrong with me?" But there is

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really something more serious that is wrong with them. Often you can figure out part of what's defective in them simply by listening to what they say is defective in you. If they call you ugly, you can bet they're ugly. If they call you stupid, you can bet they're stupid.

Almost all of my attackers were poor students. Hardly any of the boys who made fun of my looks were good-looking themselves. The girls who mocked me were unattractive, plump, or good-looking but poor students. I can say this now because distance from it has made me honest. At the time I was too busy seeing my own faults to pay attention to those in anyone else.

The truth is that everybody has assets and flaws, and everybody is insecure to some degree. But people who ridicule you have something more serious

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that is wrong with them: a bad character. They are insecure and seek to feel better about themselves at your expense. Maybe you make them feel threatened and jealous. Or maybe they aren't threatened by you at all; they just dislike you, even if they don't know you and you've never said a word to them. Sometimes you'll never figure out their reasons for choosing you. The point is that they cannot find their self-worth from within, so they try to steal it from someone else.

They have a need to put someone else down to feel good about themselves. To feel *great* about themselves, in fact. Seeing someone else get upset and lose confidence is exhilarating for them, an emotional high. It makes them feel powerful and superior. But the sad reality is this: if you get a high out of hurting someone who has done nothing

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to hurt you, it only makes you one  
thing—a criminal.

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