



## COVID-19, MENTAL CONDITIONS & EMDR CYBERBULLYING AND TECHNOLOGY-RELATED RISKS

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**Cyberbullying**, which is a form of bullying carried out with the use of digital technologies, has some peculiarities that make it even more dangerous than traditional bullying. Cyberbullying is characterised by **anonymity**, which allows the bully to increase prevarication by profiting from the fact that some platforms allow users to hide their identity. Another characteristic of cyberbullying is the **weakening of ethical qualms**: while, in traditional bullying, the bully sees the suffering he/she is causing in the victim, this is not the case in cyberbullying. As a matter of fact, on the Internet, we do not witness directly how the victims of insults and offences feel. Therefore, people feel more entitled to denigrate others online than in person. Nevertheless, the most distinctive feature of cyberbullying – which makes it particularly heinous – is the **multiplier effect**. Everything that ends up on the Internet can be seen everywhere in the world, 24/7. Therefore, while in the case of traditional bullying the victim has moments of respite because the attacks are confined to specific places – such as the school or the locker room –, in the case of cyberbullying, the victim is continuously exposed to very intense and overwhelming emotions (Iannaccone, 2009).

**Sexting** is the exchange or sharing of sexually explicit images or videos that, in most cases, are selfies. This content spreads uncontrolled on the Internet, often damaging the web or digital reputation of those involved, with repercussions not only on a social level, but also on a professional level. In fact, victims of sexting are not only targeted and mocked for what they have shared online, but the content they have shared can also be traced years later and can affect a job selection process.

Being victims of cyberbullying is a highly traumatic experience. If the victims are teenagers, the impact of such an event is even more devastating. Adolescents' social image is of paramount importance: if this image is damaged through cyberbullying or sexting, the consequences can be very serious. There are reports of children or young adults committing suicide as a result of such incidents on a daily basis.

### IMPACT OF COVID-19

The transfer of social, school and working life to a digital dimension due to the current pandemic has disproportionately increased risks and threats of the Internet: cyberbullying, sexting, online grooming and revenge porn. Old reminiscences that are claiming more and more victims among the very young and beyond. The pandemic has also seen an increase in **paedophilia**. The innate desire to proudly show our children to friends and relatives, given the impossibility of social contact, is being fulfilled through the phenomenon of sharenting. This term refers to parents sharing photos of their children on social networks. Once these pictures are on the Internet, they circulate and can easily become child pornography.

Another phenomenon that has increased during the pandemic is Internet addiction. Our primary biological imperative is to connect with others; this directly affects the release of dopamine in the reward system, explaining why social media – by creating connections between people – can be addictive. This, of course, has an even more powerful effect at a time when social contacts are banned.

Unfortunately, new phenomena have also emerged like, for example, **Zoombombing**, which refers to unwanted intrusions using obscene videos and verbal violence during a video-conference call or a learning session. The reasons for this are to be found in the increased time spent online by both minors and adults because of new habits like distance learning and working from home.

## CONSIDERATIONS IN EMDR THERAPY

### **Psychoeducation**

It is very important to provide guidance on the consequences of the misuse of technology. Parents are often distracted by mobile phones when interacting with their children; this lack of attunement has negative consequences for the child, in terms of their ability to regulate their emotions and develop a feeling of safety. Furthermore, caregivers often use digital technology to calm upset children; this represents a risk factor for the development of technology addiction. Parents need to establish a relationship with their children that helps them find strategies to achieve a state of calm and tranquillity within themselves.

Finally, parents must be informed of the importance of supervising their children when they use technology tools, as the online world can expose children and young people to real dangers. Nevertheless, parents should not take their children's mobile phones away. Such punishment can have consequences for their social relationships, which are very important in shaping the identity of adolescents.

### **EMDR with victims of cyberbullying**

Through the EMDR approach, victims can be helped to process their experiences of cyberbullying. In addition, it would also be important to work on the past traumas that have contributed to installing in them a negative belief of disvalue. This negative belief about themselves, as well as the feeling of not being able to get help from anyone, lead victims to end up in the 'net' of cyberbullying. The work with EMDR enables them to increase their self-esteem, their ability to be assertive and to ask for help, preventing the risk of ending up in other cycles of violence either as victims or perpetrators.

### **EMDR with cyberbullies**

It is necessary to listen to cyberbullies in order to understand the benefit they get from such behaviour. Often, perpetrators have witnessed family violence that has led to low self-esteem, so the cyberbully behaviour becomes an armour against their own fragility.

In other cases, they have been victims of cyberbullying themselves and become perpetrators in order to gain control of the situation.

Equally traumatic can be the experience of the cyberbully that, in many cases, has lost control of what initially appeared to be a trivial joke or game online.

### **EMDR with witnesses of cyberbullying**

Witnesses of cyberbullying need to be helped to process this traumatic experience. This includes processing the harassment they have experienced in case they have taken on the role of defender of the victim. If, on the other hand, they felt powerless and did not react to the attack to their peers, they may have developed feelings of guilt, on which is important to work. It is also important to investigate whether this inability to intervene stems from past situations that have led them to believe they cannot ask for help.

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