

Shifting Our Attitudes About Violence
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The Canadian Parliament is debating a national anti-bullying strategy.¹ The Toronto police have arrested a young male for extortion in a sexting case,² while London (Ontario) police have charged eight high school girls with criminal harassment in a case of bullying.³ Vigils were held in forty cities around the world after the suicide of bullied teen, Amanda Todd, in BC.⁴

Five years ago none of this was occurring. In the same way that public opinion and Canadian law has shifted with regard to drinking and driving or smoking in public places, our attitudes are changing about what interpersonal behaviour is harmful and therefore unacceptable. Canadian concerns are mirrored in the international arena by the World Health Organization's Global Campaign for Violence Prevention, which focuses attention on violence as a worldwide public health problem.

Linked to our growing awareness of the pervasiveness of violence is our gradual absorption of the findings of quantum physics that we are all connected as part of an enormous cosmic energy field.⁵ While social media have intensified our ability to link electronically, we still operate in many ways as though we were isolated, independent actors. We are only now recognizing that how we think, feel, speak, and act affects not only ourselves but also those around us.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 first articulated everyone's right to dignity and respect and laid the groundwork for our current repudiation of actions that demean and denigrate. Now that this positive shift in attitudes is gaining momentum, how can we help it along?

Step #1: Notice what is happening. The need to notice may seem obvious, but in fact it is easy to become absorbed in cell phones or iPods and tune out what is happening around us, a phenomenon known as "inattention blindness." We can also intentionally turn aside and not acknowledge what is happening, known as "willful blindness."

So how do we make sure that we *do* notice? In addition to engaging actively with those around us, we now have online action groups (such as www.avaaz.org or www.change.org) that can alert us to current issues.

Step #2: Interpret what is happening as unacceptable. All the publicity about bullying, in particular, is helping us see that the saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," is not true. Violence is not just physical. Verbal abuse can have devastating negative consequences by undermining a person's self-esteem and sense of safety.

There are increasing challenges to the old ideology of "kids will be kids," or "hazing will make them feel like one of the gang," or "battering is justified because she made him angry." There is now an anti-bullying law in Ontario, and hazing has become illegal in forty-six U.S. states.⁶

How do we determine what is appropriate? Typically we look to social icons like athletes or entertainers or politicians. But they are as much a product of the old ideology as we are. So we need to purposely rethink what harms ourselves and others. A new Harmlessness Scale™ has a series of questions to help us understand where our blind spots might be.⁷ It can help us see that harm extends beyond even psychological harassment to include being dismissive of self or

others, or refusing to intervene when another is harmed. Indeed, our current challenge is recognizing that failing to protect others from fear or intimidation—i.e., renegeing on our “duty of care”—is as unacceptable as the original harm.

Step #3: Take responsibility for acting. The online environment is problematic because there is not necessarily immediate feedback when comments or actions are damaging to others, and it is through clear and timely feedback that we learn and grow. But that is changing. People are starting to chastise those who post violent comments, to “un-friend” those whose behave disrespectfully, and to report Facebook pages that are filled with hate language. Christine Claveau of Calgary took such action one step further. She followed up on the Facebook link of a man who had left a demeaning post on a memorial page for Amanda Todd and reported him to his employer, who then fired him for violating company policy on respectful behaviour.⁸

In a bold move, the BC Lions football team have launched a campaign, in conjunction with the Ending Violence Association of BC, called “Be More Than a Bystander.”⁹ These athletes have recognized that domestic violence is not simply a “women’s issue” since the perpetrators are almost always men. They are using their social status to break the silence on violence against women and underscore that violence is never acceptable. They will be talking with young students about how to contribute to positive social change and helping amateur football team coaches work with their players on respectful relationships and speaking up to end violence.

Doing nothing in the face of violence is no longer an option. If we fail to act, we condone the violence and become one of the perpetrators. Each of us can help shift attitudes both by changing how we think and feel and by taking appropriate action.

Selected References

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