

Marvel Mediation & Counselling

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Sticks & Stones

“Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, But Names Will Never Hurt Me”

I think it's safe to say that just about every one of us has heard the above statement before. I also think that it's safe to say that the first time we heard it was probably from one of our parents. This phrase is typically expressed when a child complains of being called names in the school yard, or being picked on for being different. While our parents meant well by using this phrase, did they really understand what they were saying?

The truth of the matter is that the title phrase is elementary. While it outlines the risks of physical injury, it does not acknowledge the complexity of emotional wounds. It also implies that physical injury is more concerning than emotional injury.

In general, most physical injuries can be seen; especially when we're talking about the effects of being in contact with sticks and stones. Furthermore, physical injuries sustained from such an event are generally easily treatable. Emotional injuries however, are quite different. They may include depression, aggression, sadness, or even lack of any reaction. Let's take a closer look.

Yes, it is true that sticks and stones may break my bones. As a child, I fell and broke my wrist. While at car accidents as a firefighter, I have seen many people with cuts and broken bones. During my work in child welfare, I was involved in a case where a three year old child was severely burned on his forearm by his caregiver. It was never made clear if the burn was intentional, but he also had several bruises on his body in various locations. All of these examples clearly detail physical injury.

With all of the examples listed above, the physical treatment is pretty straight-forward. For the broken bones, have them reset and put a cast on the limb. The cuts may require stitches. After a week, the stitches are removed and the patient may keep a visible scar. For the burned child, he was removed from the caregiver's home, and the burn treated. He was left with a scar on the posterior of his forearm and hand. In each case, the individual was able to carry on a normal life after the physical injury healed.

Now, let's look at “Names will never hurt me.” Bullying, failed relationships, uncertainty of sexuality, abuse (verbal, physical, emotional), and lack of emotional support may all lead to the same thing; emotional injury. There are many other examples, but these few help to highlight my point. Perhaps the greatest contributor to long-term emotional injury is lack of emotional support.

Each and every one of us has had situations in our life that have been upsetting. Some people carry the burden of that upset, while others find ways to let it go. If we do not develop ways to cope with emotional injury, we are left with emotional scars. Unlike the healed cut or broken bone, these scars are not easily visible to the naked eye, and require advanced technology to be seen at all in some chronic cases. We may see some outward

signs of mental health difficulties such as violence, excessive crying, or mania, but there are many people with emotional wounds that we would never know about.

Think of how many people commit suicide, but their outward signs of depression were not noticed. They are often described as shy, introverted or different. Their withdrawn presentation may have been a sign but because it was not exceptionally different, it was not paid attention to. Then there are cases of murder by prominent members of the community followed by comments of “Such a nice boy.” The deaths are an outward sign, but often noticed too late.

While every case of emotional injury does not lead to physical death, it may lead to some form of emotional death. Examples may include fear of commitment, being emotionally guarded, promiscuity, risk-taking, or addictions. Many people use some or all of the above to help mask the emotional wounds that they have and as a result, they miss out on possibly wonderful opportunities.

These incidents occur because of emotional injuries that have not been addressed by the person experiencing them. It’s not accurate to say that the injuries are healed but rather, we learn to re-evaluate their meaningfulness in our lives. Left untreated, these injuries may begin to manifest themselves through behaviour issues, learning disabilities, suicide and more. In medicine, treatment implies a passive process. While some emotional injuries may be treated with medication, most often involve a much more active process. There are many avenues to explore but ultimately, the answer lies within the person who has been wounded.

As human beings, we must all do our best to help others develop the necessary tools of tolerance, compassion, and understanding. With this foundation, people will be more apt to seek assistance when they need it. They will also be more inclined to speak out against someone else being emotionally harmed. Whether a child or an adult, we all have a responsibility to help others, and to speak out against emotional harm. As family and friends, our role is not to tell people “I told you so” when they fall or feel down. Our role is to help them up, and tell them that you’re there for them. That’s the support they need.

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Paul has an honours bachelor of science degree in Psychology, and a Fitness & Lifestyle Management diploma. He is an accredited family mediator, and has worked in child welfare since 200. Paul has also been a martial arts instructor since 1993. He has assisted with the instruction of courses in mediation, and screening for domestic violence and power imbalances at Riverdale Mediation, and has also written articles for the Canadian Jiu-Jitsu Council and Riverdale Mediation. Paul also has several articles posted on his own websites.