

Supporting a Young Person Experiencing Cyber-Bullying

Kelly is sixteen years old, living in a hostel and has been attending a catholic school for the last seven months after a four month period of school absenteeism.

Kelly arranges to see the school counsellor. She, Kelly, presents as a well groomed young woman who appears physically healthy, albeit slightly underweight. She is articulate and confident, however there is a formality to her manner not usually associated with a sixteen year old.

Kelly shares with the counsellor that she has recently been the victim of cyber-bullying. She explains that she has been involved in a same sex relationship with a classmate, Jacinta, and while they had tried to be discrete about their relationship, "word got out" and now she is receiving abusive comments posted on her Facebook wall and sent via dummy email accounts by a handful of classmates. Kelly says the comments she has received accuse her of being "unnatural", "perverted", "gross" and some of them say she is "going to hell".

Kelly describes Jacinta as the best thing that has happened to her and worries that the stress of the cyber-bullying might cause conflict in the relationship. Kelly is unsure why Jacinta is not receiving the same negative attention and figures maybe her classmates prefer Jacinta to her. Kelly states that Jacinta tells her not to worry but "I just can't stop- it is not as easy as Jacinta makes out - I've never really felt like I fitted in anywhere".

Kelly explains that she was recently kicked out of her adoptive family home and hasn't had, nor does she want, contact with her parents. Her adoption was part of an inter-country adoption program - she was born in the UK and has never met her biological parents. She is the only child of her adoptive parents, Hayley and Phil who adopted her when she was three months old. About 14 months ago, Hayley caught Kelly stealing money from Phil's bedside drawer. She called the police and when they arrived she told them (in front of Kelly) "Take her away ... we have had it up to here with her. I really can't take anymore... this girl is a compulsive liar!"

Kelly was initially moved into a family group home, but quickly absconded and ended up living on the streets for about four months before she was directed to a local hostel, by an employee at an NGO where Kelly had been going for a free hot meal occasionally. Kelly says she enjoys living at the hostel and gets on well with her fellow residents, most of whom have mental health issues. "I'm really happy living here and probably won't move until me and Jacinta find a place together" Kelly says.

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The hostel encouraged Kelly to return to school and negotiated for her to attend the local catholic school.

Kelly further explains that when she was about eight years of age her mother, Hayley, became concerned about some strange behaviour Kelly was starting to demonstrate. Kelly had become reluctant to attend school, persistently complaining of being “too tired”; she had become attached to a soft toy which had previously served as decoration on her bed, and had begun to suffer from regular nightmares. Kelly also, unexpectedly and rather suddenly “turned “on her father’s best friend, refusing to be in the same room with him. He had been a regular visitor to their home as he was Phil’s golfing partner and he had, to date, enjoyed a good relationship with Kelly having no children of his own.

Hayley took Kelly to a psychiatrist who suspected that she may have been sexually abused. The psychiatrist diagnosed Kelly with depression and anxiety and prescribed medication. Hayley took Kelly off her medication after a few weeks as, “they weren’t doing any good.”

Kelly claims to have little recollection of this period of time, but does remember the nightmares and tells the counsellor that she has recently been experiencing similar ones. Kelly continues.... “I think my depression and anxiety has flared up again Medication didn’t work in the past, but maybe it will work now – can you help me get some? It might help me sleep at night and just take the edge off”.

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