## The Power of Self-Confidence

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One day, I read an article about a girl. She was receiving lots of hate messages from her schoolmates. She changed schools but they kept haunting her through social media. One year later she was found dead in her room. It turns out that she had committed suicide. Now let me ask you the following two questions. One, was there a better way to deal with the situation? And two, is it necessary at all to react to bullies? I hope that the following story of my growing up in Japan can help in finding answers to these questions.

I came to Japan when I was nine. Having lots of friends back in my country, Uzbekistan, I wanted to find new friends in a new place, too. It seems that I was too optimistic, too hopeful, although the first school day was promising. My peers were very kind and seemed to accept me. But things changed at noon when I took out the lunch I brought from home. One of my Japanese peers asked me “Why can’t you eat the same school lunch as us?” I explained that I was Muslim and I cannot eat pork. My classmates seemed to understand, but soon things went downhill. Some suddenly started ignoring me, while others mocked me with words I did not know. I did not fit in the Japanese lifestyle. They could not accept the fact that I was different. My hopes of enjoying my life in Japan were crushed by growing criticism that started from one sandwich.

In hopes of finding a place to feel comfortable, I changed five different elementary schools in four years. But things got only worse. I faced abuse, disregard, and even violence. Once, my classmate pushed me so badly that I broke my front tooth. By the time I was in junior high school, I believed that something was wrong with me. I remember eating my lunch while holding it under my desk. On other occasions, I simply did not eat it. Finally, I started hating myself for being foreign. However, one day, I met an Austrian exchange student. Instantly, we became friends. We had a great time together, but when she left, I was face-to-face with bullying again. Yet, this time things were different. I felt that I had the power to resist bullies. I realized that no one would respect me if I didn’t have confidence in myself. My Austrian friend helped me to understand that people are different and being an individual is actually good.

Now I am a college student and I have become much more confident. I feel happier and mentally stronger. I still hear a lot of criticism, such as body shaming and discrimination, but it does not hurt me so much. I know that those who bully do not know much about me and all they can do is comment on my looks, but there is no need to waste time by thinking why they are so mean. Since they do not care about my feelings, why should I care about their reasons to hate me? I learned to respect myself. Moreover, I believe now that I actually benefit from bullies, and I want to tell them ‘Thank you, for making me the person I am now!”

Having shared my story, I do not want to give the impression that bullying is only a Japanese problem. Each year about 4500 suicides occur worldwide because of bullying. Moreover, there are at least 100 times more attempts to commit suicide. Bullying is the third leading cause of death among young people on this planet. Why? Because we are left alone with our problems, often unheard even by our parents and friends. Yet, even when there is somebody who is ready to listen to us, it is hard to explain what is going on. It is hard to put into words the power bullies have over us. Eventually, we learn to shut down our feelings, and keep our problems in secret. But, the pain is there. It eats us from inside, becoming larger as it destroys our will to resist and carry on. Some of us then become depressed, others kill the suffering with drugs and alcohol while the most sensitive of us decide to take their lives, like the girl I was talking about at the beginning.

So, coming back to my initial question, is there a way out? Can the weak be protected at all from their bullies? I am afraid there is no meaning in doing anything against them. Unfortunately, arrogant people who find comfort in hurting others will always exist. Yet, there is one thing you should know: no matter how weak or different you are, you have something bullies do not have, you are beautiful and unique in your own way, and you should change yourself only if you want to, not because you have to. Stay positive. Respect yourself. Be confident. In my opinion, those are your true weapons against bullies.