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Topic: How does online disinhibition effect the mental health of the victims and the perpetrators involved?

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## **Online Pandemic: Toxic Disinhibition's Impact on Mental Health**

The digital world ushered in a new sphere of human interaction and new human behaviours. Online disinhibition refers to a unique phenomenon where people in digital environments can act out more openly and intensely without the restraint of in-person social conventions. Consequently, behaviours that would be publicly uncomfortable or inappropriate can more easily occur. Psychologist John Suler defined online disinhibition and identified several key factors contributing to it.<sup>1</sup>

Certain factors contribute to online disinhibition. Anonymity occurs as people conceal their true identities behind pseudonyms or avatars.<sup>2</sup> This sense of hiding behind a digital mask can lead to benign disinhibition, like sharing deep personal feelings, or toxic disinhibition.<sup>3</sup> The absence of physical presence and eye contact—key influences on human interaction—in virtual interactions also reduces behavioral inhibitions. Asynchronicity of online communication also distances feelings of responsibility through time lags and allows for "emotional hit and run."<sup>4</sup> Solipsistic introjection can lead individuals to project their inner voices onto others.<sup>5</sup> This creates a sense that "people on the internet become a part of one's shared mind via the internet" and people tend to be harsher or more aggressive within the confines of their mental space.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, certain behaviours resulting from online disinhibition are blunt, insensitive or cruel, amounting to harassment.

Online harassment resulting from toxic disinhibition is a prevalent issue. Amnesty International reports that one in three women in New Zealand has experienced online abuse and harassment. Moreover, "Of those women who experienced abuse, 75% said they had not been able to sleep well, 49% feared for their physical safety and 32% feared for the physical safety of their families as a result."<sup>7</sup> In one global survey, about

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<sup>1</sup> John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 7, no. 3 (2004): 321–26, <https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>.

<sup>2</sup> "Analysis Of Self Disclosure On Users Of Pseudonym Accounts Which Display Toxic Disinhibition On Twitter Social Media: A Literature Study."

<sup>3</sup> Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect"

<sup>4</sup> Chis, "Cyber Psychology – The Online Disinhibition Effect."

<sup>5</sup> Shukla, "Online Disinhibition Effect: Why We Express More Online."

<sup>6</sup> Shukla, "Online Disinhibition Effect"

<sup>7</sup> "Amnesty Reveals Alarming Impact of Online Abuse against Women | Amnesty International NZ."

one in five teens has been cyberbullied and 41% said cyberbullying made them feel depressed or helpless.<sup>8</sup>

Emotional distress caused by online harassment, such as hate comments or threats, can drive victims to distance themselves from both online and offline social interactions, deepening feelings of isolation and loneliness. Negative comments and insults tear away at a person's self-esteem, self-worth and enhance feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. Alarming levels of chronic stress and anxiety result.<sup>9</sup> In severe cases, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder ensue, including nightmares and emotional turmoil related to stress experienced online.<sup>10</sup>

Perpetrators also suffer negative mental health consequences, such as overwhelming guilt and shame for their actions. This can take a toll on their mental health due to internal moral conflict and stress. Perpetrators may experience heightened stress and anxiety, especially if their actions were severe and social backlash or legal consequences is expected.<sup>11</sup> A continued cycle of negativity can result in social isolation and deepening their sense of detachment.

Empathy, respect and responsible online behaviour should be the norm online. Through proper education and awareness campaigns, people can become more considerate. Moderation and reporting systems should also be strengthened to prevent online harassment and promote a safer online environment for everyone.

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<sup>8</sup> "Ground-Breaking Vodafone Survey on Teen Cyberbullying."

<sup>9</sup> Greenwood and Ellis, "The Impact of Cyberbullying on Mental Health."

<sup>10</sup> Chan, "Does Self-Disclosure on Social Networking Sites Enhance Well-Being? The Role of Social Anxiety, Online Disinhibition, and Psychological Stress."

<sup>11</sup> "Effects of Bullying."

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