

Cyber abuse: what is it?

Cyber abuse is online behaviour which is reasonably likely to have a seriously threatening, intimidating, harassing or humiliating effect on a person. It is behaviour that threatens to hurt a person socially, psychologically or even physically.

It can take place in various online spaces, like chat rooms, on social networking sites, through emails, messaging apps and on message boards.

Cyber abuse can also involve a range of behaviours, some of which are described as:

- trolling
- flaming
- cyber bullying
- cyber hate
- cyber violence
- cyber mobbing
- cyber stalking
- cyber harassment
- cyber racism and online hate speech
- technology-facilitated abuse
- sextortion
- image-based abuse.

Terms like 'trolling', 'cyber hate' and 'cyber harassment' are often used interchangeably to refer to the same type of abuse.

These terms can sometimes be used to describe behaviour that may not necessarily be serious enough to be considered 'cyber abuse'. While some online behaviours and comments might be inappropriate or hurtful, they may not always constitute cyber abuse. Some examples can include sarcastic comments, insults, strong opposing views and off-topic statements that deliberately derail conversation threads.

These behaviours may, however, reach the threshold of being considered a form of cyber abuse if there is a larger or serious pattern of targeted online abuse, and therefore likely to have a seriously threatening, intimidating, harassing or humiliating effect on a person.

How to help:

- report the person being abusive to the website or social media administrators – if they reappear under a different name, report them again
- don't respond to their comments – it can be hard, but try to ignore them
- use all the tools available to block or mute them – if they reappear under a different name, block or mute them again
- back each other up online – support anyone who is the target of online abuse, without directly engaging with the person being abusive
- minimise exposure – if possible, try to switch off at certain times of the day and/or create safe havens, for example keep your device out of your bedroom at night.