

I am a bully's dream, no doubt about it.

No arms. No legs. No defense.

Born without limbs for reasons never determined, I was blessed in so many other ways. My greatest blessing was a loving and supportive family. They sheltered and encouraged me for the first years of my life. But once I left the protective shelter of family for the hallways and playgrounds of elementary school, I felt like I had a target on my chest that said, "Bullies, aim here."

I felt alone in my fear of bullies, but I wasn't alone. And neither are you.

If you've been bullied, the first thing you need to understand is that their attacks, taunts, and mean acts aren't really about you, any flaws you might have, or anything you might have done. Bullies have their own issues. They pick on you to make themselves feel better, to vent their anger, to feel more powerful, or even because they can't think of anything else to do.

I know it's lame, but it's true.

When I was a teenager, I wasted a lot of time trying to figure out why bullies picked on me. There was one guy in particular who really got inside my head. He bullied everybody, but for some reason I took it personally. I obsessed over his motives. Finally I realized that his bullying wasn't about my problems. It was about his.

You may have a bully who has had the same impact on you, getting inside your head, knotting your stomach with stress, and tormenting your dreams because you can't figure out why you are the target. I'm here to ease your mind and lighten that burden.

Your bully's motives don't matter. You do.

Your safety and your happiness are important to me and everyone else who loves and cares about you; so instead of focusing on why a bully is picking on you, let's focus on helping you feel secure and happy again.

Does that sound like a plan? I think so!

But before we move on, I want you to know that there is no single infallible strategy for dealing one-on-one with bullies. And I certainly don't recommend you resort to violence if you can help it! Don't ever let a bully lure you into a fight. If a bully attacks you, defend yourself but get away as fast as you can. If you have any reason to think a bully is going to harm you physically, you need to talk to an adult who can help you before that happens.

## The Bullying Epidemic

It's important to understand from the beginning that many people share your pain in dealing with this problem. Being bullied, sadly, is as common as catching a cold or stubbing your toe. I travel all over the world talking to young people about this issue. No matter where I go, bullying is a major topic of concern. Teens in every school in every town and every country tell me they have mental, emotional, physical, and

spiritual pain because of being bullied.

A teen in China told me that he'd tried to commit suicide eight times because of being bullied at school. A cute little Korean girl in Boise, Idaho, came up to me crying after I gave a speech on bullying. She said, "I get teased every day about being Korean because I'm the only Asian in the whole school." I hear similar stories from bullying victims in Chile, Brazil, Australia, Russia, Serbia, and around the world. Bullying is everywhere, and it takes many forms. Most of us are familiar with childhood bullies who threaten to beat us up, make fun of us, or turn friends against us. Adults may experience bullying in the form of sexual harassment or as discrimination based on race, religion, sexual identity, or disabilities. Bullies can be your boss, coworkers, teachers, coaches, boyfriends, or girlfriends—anyone who abuses his power or position.

It's sad to say, but parents can be bullies too. Suicides are a major problem among young people in Asia, and part of the problem is that many teens are under incredible pressure to earn top grades so they can make it into the best schools and get the best jobs for the most pay. Parents naturally want their children to do well, but when a mother and father give love and support only if their child is successful in their eyes, it is a form of bullying. There was one case in which the parents burned their child with cigarettes because her grades were not up to their standards. That's an extreme case to be sure, but I've encountered similar stories around the world.

The most common bullying experience is being taunted or ridiculed for being "different" in some way. I'm the poster child for this. For most of my life, I've been a bully magnet. I've heard every imaginable nasty comment about my lack of limbs. Cruel jokes. Even physical threats.

It didn't help that my family moved a couple of times when I was in school. We went from one side of Australia to the other, then we moved to the United States and back again. At each new school, I wasn't just the only kid with no arms and no legs; I was usually the only kid in a wheelchair. When we moved to the United States, I hit the bully-target trifecta: I was the only kid in my school with no arms and no legs, the only kid in a wheelchair, and the only kid with an Australian accent! Different? Me, mate?

Sure, I stood out from the crowd, and the fact that I was often the new kid without friends made me an even easier target. But I realized early on that bullies would find a reason to pick on anyone. They called the smart kids "nerds," the tall kids "bird legs," and the short kids "runts." If perfect people existed, bullies probably would mock them for being "too perfect."

Still, if you are being bullied, it hurts. It's a terrible experience that often seems like it will never end. As someone who endured it throughout my teenage years and still runs into it from time to time, I want to give you hope and peace. You can rise above and beyond it.