PROTECT AND SUPPORT VULNERABLE TEENAGERS 2019

Understanding the online disinhibition effect

Acting anonymously on social media can lead to impulsivity and a lack of restraint. **Alan Mackenzie** explains how you can encourage students to understand and reflect on their online behavior.

'Think before you post.' It's advice we have given to children and young people for many years. A simple, clear and pragmatic message to try to make them understand the importance of the positive and negative impact that online messages can have now and in the future. But for something so simple, this message has its roots in a long history of well-established psychology.

The disinhibition effect

We all know what disinhibition is: a lack of restraint, or impulsivity and poor risk assessment. We are all guilty of this now and again, but the fact that we are hidden behind a device makes a difference.

To understand this difference we must look to Professor John Suler, pioneer of cyberpsychology and author of 'The online disinhibition effect' back in 2004. This article details well researched theories on why people may self-disclose or act out online. One of the most important questions Suler asks is, 'Who are you online?'

The internet gives anyone the opportunity to be who they want to be: you can alter your name, age, personality, appearance, gender and much more to present a persona that is either a true reflection of yourself or someone completely different. A simple example might be your social media profile.

- What is your username?
- What information do you disclose about yourself in your profile?
- What avatar do you use?

Online and offline behaviour

I use many different social media services, but predominantly Twitter for professional use and Instagram for personal use. The decision as to whether or not I follow somebody is based solely on their profile and a quick glance through a few of their posts. Whether this offers a true reflection of that person I'll probably never know, but it's akin to meeting a person face to face for the first time and immediately deciding whether I will talk to them or not. It's strange when you think of it that way.

Whenever I'm thinking about the difference between online and offline behaviour I'll imagine a situation. For example, if someone posts something interesting or useful on Twitter, I'll usually give a compliment, but instead of saying thank you, that person will simply retweet the compliment.

Imagine that in a real-life situation, you meet a 'friend' in the street that says something really interesting, you compliment that person and instead of saying thank you, they shout out your compliment at the top of their voice so everyone else knows you've complimented them. What strange behaviour!

Benign and toxic disinhibition

Professor Suler explains that the disinhibition effect is a double-edged sword. To people they don't know, someone may:

- share very personal information
- reveal secret emotions or fears
- show unusual acts of kindness.

This would be benign disinhibition. But on the flip side, there can be hatred, anger and criticism among others which are described as toxic disinhibition. But the overriding question is, why?

There are eight ingredients to the online disinhibition effect.

- Dissociative anonymity – you don't know me.
- Invisibility – you can't see me.
- Asynchronicity – see you later.
- Solipsistic introjection – it's all in my head.
- Dissociative imagination – it's just a game.
- Perceived privacy – just between you and me.
- Attenuated status and authority – we're equals.
- Social facilitation – everyone else thinks it's ok.

Most people will recognise the first two, which are arguably the most common we will see across any age group. But they can all be explained very simply: hiding behind a screen.

Understand why

The theory of online disinhibition is not an excuse for poor online behaviour. However, for people to be able to make informed decisions they need to understand what factors are at play. You could tell your students to keep their social media profiles private. But this advice is unrealistic, particularly for:

- an art student who wishes to showcase their work through Instagram
- an aspiring footballer showing their skills on YouTube
- an aspiring writer or journalist expressing themselves through blogs and LinkedIn posts to get noticed.

Telling young people what they should or should not do online and the consequences of negative posts is important. But with secondary school students in particular, understanding

why things happen, why we sometimes do things without consciously thinking through what we are posting and the potential consequences, is an important aspect of developing critical thinking skills.

Think about actions

I recently realised that, in the assembly-style talks I have given to students to make them aware of the consequences of their online actions, I had been missing out the 'why'.

As I started to include a very simple explanation of online disinhibition, I could see genuine interest on the students' faces. I used very serious examples (social media posts and YouTube comments are your best friends here!) but I also injected humorous and upbeat examples to keep them engaged.

I distinctly remember the first time I gave this talk to a large assembly of Year 8 and Year 9 students. At the end of the talk I was approached by three girls who openly explained a very serious situation they found themselves in (a child protection matter) as a result of a post they thought at the time was funny. Thankfully they realised something was going horribly wrong before anything happened and they reported the issue to the school.

But what they said next was important. 'Thank you for not blaming us, but for making us realise why we did what we did.' Whether their actions were due to an aspect of online disinhibition I could not say, but it got them thinking, and that's impact.

Profile management

Encourage your students to scrutinise their online profiles. What persona do they represent? Is it a true reflection of themselves or are they trying to be someone different? Use a few toxic examples of online posts and discuss what ingredient of online disinhibition this may represent.

You don't need to be a psychologist, neither does their answer need to be correct. The point is to get students thinking critically.

For seven years, Alan Mackenzie was the service manager at Lincolnshire County Council, where he managed all IT services for around 350 schools. He was also the e-safety lead for Children's Services, raising initiatives for schools, police and the third sector. Alan then left the local authority to establish his own e-safety and ICT consultancy service for schools and other organisations.