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While bullying has always been an issue in schools, it is becoming more apparent these days, say teachers and counsellors.

Child psychiatrist Brian Yeo tells The New Paper on Sunday that he has been seeing more victims who have been seriously affected by being bullied in school.

Dr Yeo says: "A lowered self-esteem caused by bullying makes them very vulnerable and can lead them to harm themselves.

"I've seen patients who become bulimic or cut themselves after they were bullied because of their weight," he says.

"It's their way of maintaining control of the situation."

A teacher at a school near Paya Lebar, who wanted to be known only as Miss Kheng, says that it is clear when overweight students are being bullied – they become very quiet and hardly interact with their classmates.

"When I try to talk to kids whom I feel are being bullied by their peers, they refuse to acknowledge it. I can't do anything about it," she says.

According to surveys conducted in 2006 and 2007 by anti-bullying website www.bullyfreecampaign.sg, a quarter of secondary school students were victims of bullying. And 20 per cent of primary school pupils have also been bullied.

The childhood obesity rate here has also risen from 9 per cent in 2005 to 10.9 per cent in 2011, according to the Health Promotion Board.

Ms Sylvia Ang, a counsellor at the Student Service Hub (Bukit Merah) which is part of the Singapore Children's Society, says that there are many reactions to bullying.

"They range from keeping quiet to sharing with their friends or trusted adults (teachers or parents). There are some who may actually choose to take things into their own hands and seek revenge on the bullies," says Ms Ang.

Miss Jennifer Tay, 24, who works in corporate communications, silently suffered at the hands of bullies.

When she joined the Latin Dance Club as a co-curricular activity (CCA) in Singapore Polytechnic, Miss Tay, who is 1.63m tall and weighed 56kg at the time, was called out for being chubby. This was despite her weight being in the healthy range. Her BMI, or body mass index, was 21.1. An unhealthy BMI rating is 25 and above.

She says: "When the girls had to be lifted up by the guys, the other girls would say 'surely cannot lah, you will drop her' mockingly."

The name-calling constantly weighed on her mind and it af-

ected her self-esteem.

Miss Tay, who was also called names in the Trim And Fit club in primary school, tells TNPS that the bullying triggered her unhealthy eating habits.

"It was because of my experience in polytechnic and primary school that I started with unhealthy eating habits," she says.

She starved herself for about a year – choosing to eat only lunch. She weighed 48kg at her lightest.

"I just wanted to be skinny very desperately," she says. "I didn't want to be singled out."

Besides low self-esteem, victims of bullying may also suffer from anxiety, anger, sadness and isolation, says Ms Ang.

But she suggests that students should try to ignore or walk away from bullies.

She says: "If the victim can appear as if he is not bothered, bullies will feel that it is no longer fun to bully him and may stop."

If that doesn't work, says Ms Ang, telling the bullies to stop their behaviour is an option.

Ms Tay never confronted her schoolmates who were constantly disturbing her. Instead, she made sure she was always skinny.

Even now, when she feels that she is putting on a little weight, she gets slightly depressed and goes back to her old eating habits, where she skips breakfast and dinner.

Dr Yeo says that the problem is made worse when it is trusted friends who are the perpetrators.

"They are crushed that someone they trust is making them feel bad."

But students may not even be aware that they are bullying their overweight schoolmates.

Miss Kheng says: "The students may think of the name-calling as just a joke, not realising how it affects others."

A Secondary 1 student, who wanted to be known only as Nasirah, says: "I wouldn't say I bully, but sometimes I point at my friend's tummy and ask her what's that. But she seems to be okay with it."

Victims of bullying must also realise that there are other ways to restore their self-esteem, says Dr Yeo.

"Students who have been bullied may choose to concentrate on their schoolwork or CCA so that there is something more affirming that will lift their spirits up."

But he admits that it is not so easy for victims of bullying to feel that there is more to life than just their weight.

He says: "It is a long-term process for victims to be fully comfortable in their own skin."

*Overweight
kids
targeted
in school*