

# Bullying of any form is not okay—let alone the cowardly keyboard warriors who hide behind their computers or phones.

Debbie Organ



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## My Personal Perspective:

During my early high school years, I experienced bullying—unable to go to the toilet without the risk of an attack or having my head shoved into a toilet. Though a mild experience compared to others, the memories linger. Fortunately, this was confined to my school years, providing a sense of safety once I left the school grounds.

I strongly dislike bullies in all forms, but cyberbullying has taken backyard bullying to a whole new level. Imagining how life as a teenager would be under 24/7 online abuse is beyond comprehension. The rise in youth suicide, and suicides in general, emphasises the urgent need to condemn such behaviour rather than normalise it.

As an adult, associated with a campaign against unethical business contracts and practices, I faced substantial abuse, including death threats against myself and my family. Instead of succumbing to the threats, I chose to expose these practices through a series of articles and conference presentations on the Importance of Understanding Fine Print.

All of that pales in comparison to the abuse witnessed and experienced since I stepped into Oak Flats Bowling Club.

## So, what frustration has triggered yet another article?

Everyone has their own challenges, and I am no exception. On Australia Day long weekend, I took John (whom I previously took off the streets after being beaten by bullies) out of his nursing home to spend the day at the club.

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Little did I know, the aged care facility forgot to provide him with incontinence gear, and he had no underwear. The day started with a bathroom disaster, leaving me with a massive cleanup job. The weekend continued with caring for my ill mum, suffering from dementia, and questioning the quality of care she also received.

Feeling tired and stressed, I decided to go for a coffee and see a movie on Sunday afternoon. However, my phone started 'pinging,' signalling trouble at the club. Distressed staff members had sent screenshots of a local community page filled with herd nastiness and derogatory comments about the club and its staff.

### So, what had triggered this madness?

A post was placed on the Our Oak Flats Community Page regarding the club, its brand-new furniture, and that, reportedly, our tables available at the time could not be placed together as they are of differing shapes and designs. This is less than 48 hours after the furniture had been installed. So, this person went to the Lakeview Hotel, following which they needed, it seems, to share this experience on Facebook.

Firstly, on the same day that papers were reporting on potential world war, groups of men boarding trains in Sydney in balaclavas, kids terrorising homes and people, and tornadoes threatening Queensland, this is a first-world problem, which could have been easily discussed with management. Rather, it triggered over 116 comments, and hundreds of reactions, damaged the reputation of the club and, more importantly, caused substantial stress for our hard-working staff.

On Monday night, just over 24 hours later, I am at the club with staff, one in particular, increasingly agitated about the posts, and in particular, they were aware that one author of one of these comments subsequently booked a table at the club for 12 that night under the name "anonymous" (One has to wonder why they would come to such a bad club).

An hour later, an ambulance was called to the club as our stressed staff member's blood pressure was over 250.

Guess what! Keyboard warriors, hiding behind the anonymity of your phone or computer, unleashing derogatory comments, your harmful behaviour has consequences and takes a toll on the mental well-being of all in the club you are targeting.

### And what were these posts saying?

Pretty much they covered that the food, service, and atmosphere of the club were poor, the meals too small and too expensive, the new furniture was tacky, our staff is rude, and it all deteriorated when I stepped in as CEO, and so it went on. One post even complained about an incident in 2005.



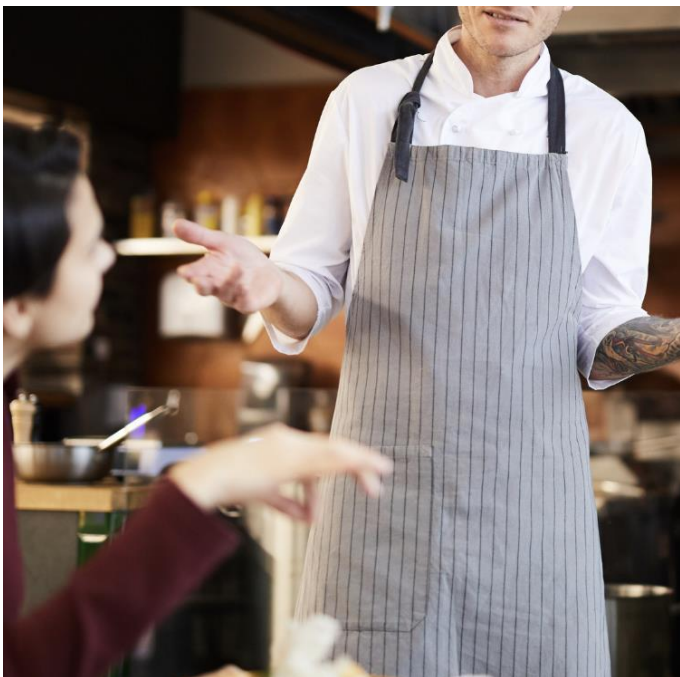
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Hospitality is a tough business, and the abuse staff across this industry receive is unacceptable.

A Queensland University study noted that over 60% of hospitality workers experience sexual harassment, verbal and psychological bullying or racial abuse, while more than 70% of employees witness these behaviours. The report goes on to say that people serving in restaurants, cafes, hotels, and clubs are often under immense strain.

All club/hotel/hospitality staff are doing their best at a time when community behaviours are rapidly deteriorating, exacerbated by the likes of alcohol, drug use and, of course, social media comments and reviews. We don't always get it right, and when that happens, let management know, and more often than not, the issue can be resolved.

Shame on those people associated with other clubs or hospitality venues who liked or commented on the posts about our club. You should know better!



Since I have been here, I could write a book about the incidents that have happened including:

- numerous incidents of staff abuse, including foul language, including from those who should know better
  - sexual harassment of staff.
  - threats of physical violence against staff.
  - domestic violence against staff and member's where on various occasions, we have had to hide women in the club for their protection. In one case, the member's partner was hiding in our carpark.
  - we had incidents of family/friend intervention, and subsequent violent incidents, have been held within the club, and we have had to get police involved.
  - threats against our members by members of the public who have substantial weapons.
  - physical and violent fights between members and smashing of equipment.
  - money laundering, drug deals and the like.
  - numerous daily abuse that we don't sell the exact wine/beer/soft drink brand that a person wants, and they think it's ok to abuse our staff, rather than order something else or go somewhere else.
  - then there are the daily, and numerous complaints that the music is too loud, it's the wrong kind of music, it's too cold, it's too hot, the meals are too big, the meals are too small, and so on.
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Hospitality staff, and, in fact, no staff of any business, should be dealing with such issues, but our clubs and staff are dealing with such issues on a daily basis. They work long hours, for hardly executive pay rates and following such abuse are stressed and tired. It is for this reason so many staff never returned to hospitality after COVID. It is also the reason many existing staff call in sick on short notice following incidents on previous shifts, which ironically leaves us short-staffed and open to further abuse if we are short-staffed in areas. So please stop targeting not only our staff but also the staff from other hospitality venues, as your nasty comments may just be the final straw that affects their mental health. If you feel the need to vent, come and see me instead.

I note that one of the posts about our club commented on the decline of the club and the quality of the food. On this post, interestingly, when I looked at the name, this person had a local business, which the club had supported for many years, and was sold, as noted on their Facebook page, as they needed to prioritise their own mental health.

What about the mental health of our staff with your nasty comments? Behind the uniforms and name tags are individuals with feelings and emotions who are working long hours to make a living.

The authors of posts that started this tirade really should have known better. We have a process for dealing with complaints, but we cannot be everything to everybody. We are a small club and recently, have actually been turning people away as we have limited space.

If we are not meeting your specific needs or budgets, there is plenty of great choice in the community.

Up the road is the *Lakeview Hotel*. This hotel is owned by the Redcape Group and overseen by a friend of mine. They have a child play facility (which we do not) and they are investing millions of dollars into this facility, so this venue may suit you better, and is only going to get better! *The Waterfront Tavern* is beautiful over the water, perhaps a little more expensive, which it needs to be to recover the costs of a first-class fit out.

We also have lots of lovely clubs in the area, and I have been in this industry for over 30 years, so I am the last person who is going to run them or their hard-working staff down. *Warilla Sporties and Club Windang* are lovely for a wine or cocktail, *Albion Park RSL* has completed a lovely new fit out and larger clubs in the area offer a large range of facilities to cover most needs. *The Master Builders Club* in town has invested a lot of money in their venue and has perhaps the best sports bar of any club in Australia.

There is so much choice if our club is not what you need, so please check them out, but again, be respectful of their staff and if the venue is not for you, be a grown-up and find what place makes you happy, rather than abuse staff trying to cover their cost of living like everybody else.

As for the cost of meals, our costs have risen like all other businesses; employee costs are up 20%, insurance has doubled, suppliers' costs have increased and the cost of keeping bowls greens is substantial and increasing.

52 bowling clubs in Sydney and substantially more in regional areas have closed, and many more are at risk of closing. If our prices are not for you, find the venue and food that suits your needs.

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We are aware that in the digital era, online reviews hold significant influence over consumer decisions, and constructive criticism can help businesses improve. We get positive and negative reviews like everybody else, but let me tell you the number of “fake reviews” from people who have never visited the club (and other businesses and venues) is substantial and increasing, from people with their own agendas, yet these reviews cannot be removed.

The Facebook posts that targeted our club in this case have had a detrimental effect on our team that was uncalled for and is just bullying.

If you have an issue with our club or staff, make an appointment to speak to me or our Venue Managers in person, rather than trolling and writing negative posts remotely.

If we were a small business, posts such as these, could see the business close, which is hardly fair to business owners who may have invested their life savings in setting up a business, and often working 7 days a week.



A member said to me, ‘Don't worry, this stuff has been happening in this area for a long time.’ While, of course, it’s a community issue happening all over the world, these poor behaviours and practices are becoming normalised and systemic, which for me, is NOT OK.

### ‘Our Oak Flats’ Page

The terms and conditions of this page are as follows:

“Negative comments about people or businesses or bullying of any kind isn't allowed, and degrading comments about things such as race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender or identity will not be tolerated.”

So they are not adhering to their own terms and conditions!

Trolling or making negative comments about someone may not necessarily be illegal, but it can potentially lead to legal consequences depending on the nature and severity of the comments. Laws regarding harassment, defamation, and cyberbullying vary, but social media platforms have their own community guidelines and terms of service, which outline acceptable behaviour.

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Hospitality workers play a vital role in creating memorable experiences for customers, however, they face numerous challenges, including the impact of negative reviews and online trolling. It's important to recognise the human element behind the roles and treat hospitality workers with the respect they deserve. As a community, we also need to recognise the serious impact cyberbullying can have on the mental health and well-being of others and do all in our power to stop all forms of bullying.

## Oak Flats Bowling & Recreation Club Limited

This is not the first time this issue has been raised with club members.

In 2020, the Club sent correspondence to all its members, noting that "Enough is Enough; bullying on social media has to stop." The letter referred to our Customer Complaints and Grievance Policy, which serves as a condition of entry into the club and a requirement of membership under the rules of the club's constitution.

The letter rightly points out that "Simply liking a post on social media may imply that you support a comment or point of view. Liking a comment that intimidates another person is equivalent to standing alongside the bully. Don't make a comment, don't like, don't react with an emoji, don't share, and don't repost."

The Board and management of the club have zero tolerance for bullies and similar behaviours, which is also a condition of entry and membership into the club.

Let's face it; life is too short not to be happy. If you have been writing negative or derogatory comments about the club and its staff, it's evident that you are not happy at our venues.

We want you to be happy; therefore, we will be cancelling the membership of those involved to assist them in finding their happy place somewhere else.

#Enough

#letsstopbullying

Debbie Organ

CEO, Oaks Flats Bowling & Recreation Club