

Research article

# A Study on Self-Acceptance Among Individuals Who Have Experienced Past Bullying

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## Abstract

This research is motivated by the rampant bullying that often occurs in educational settings. Bullying experienced during school can have long-term negative effects on victims, affecting them both psychologically and socially. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of individuals who were bullied in the past and to understand how they engaged in self-acceptance of these unpleasant experiences. This research employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five participants who had a history of experiencing bullying. Data analysis was conducted inductively using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The results show three processes of self-acceptance. The first is the initial process, which involves the victim's experience of bullying. The second stage discusses the period after experiencing bullying, including its long-term effects and the factors that support individuals in recovering from past experiences. The final stage is the period of self-acceptance, during which individuals experience positive effects. Based on the findings of this study, individuals who have accepted themselves can lead more prosperous lives, regulate their emotions more positively, and find greater meaning in life.

Keywords: bullying, acceptance, self-acceptance, social psychology, psychology

## 1. Introduction

Self-acceptance is a vital component of psychological well-being and resilience, enabling individuals to recognize and embrace their strengths and weaknesses (Sagone & Caroli, 2014). Previous research underscores the significant role of self-acceptance in overall well-being (Kuyumcu & Rohner, 2018; Ng et al., 2020) and mental health (Ng et al., 2020; Niu et al., 2022). Accepting oneself is crucial, especially in promoting mental health and well-being.

Goldsmith et al. (2014) found that self-acceptance helps diminish negative cognitive patterns such as self-blame and shame, which are often linked to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Trauma survivors frequently develop negative perceptions of themselves and their environment, impeding self-acceptance (Rizeq & McCann, 2023). Whitaker et al. (2023) observed that traumatized individuals often feel undeserving of affection and attention, further hindering self-acceptance. Additionally, past trauma can undermine psychological well-being, as shown in studies indicating that lacking well-being is often related to traumatic experiences (Barros et al., 2022; Ilham & Saraswati, 2024; Natasya & Susilawati, 2020). These findings highlight the importance of self-acceptance, particularly for those who have experienced trauma.

Supporting these statements, research links self-acceptance to various mental health aspects, including self-esteem, self-efficacy, and psychological well-being (Qian et al., 2022). In addition, Pramono and Astuti (2017) emphasized that self-acceptance is vital for survival and comfort, as it allows individuals to acknowledge both positive and negative traits, even in challenging situations. Mewengkang et al. (2020) further support this, showing that self-acceptance influences social adaptation.

Research indicates that maintaining optimal well-being is essential, as high well-being promotes healthy lifestyle choices—such as regular exercise and balanced nutrition—and reduces the risk of chronic illnesses (Kardas et al., 2019; Takao et al., 2021). Several studies reveal that self-acceptance significantly contributes to the well-being of individuals with chronic pain conditions (Faustino et al., 2020; Kiropoulos et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2020; Suzuki et al., 2021), suggesting its critical role in both psychological and physical health.

This study investigates self-acceptance among adults who experienced bullying at school. The researchers aim to understand how these individuals can accept themselves after difficult past experiences, specifically bullying. Since bullying can have long-lasting effects if victims do not process or release negative emotions, this research emphasizes sharing personal journeys toward self-acceptance to highlight meaningful experiences and transformative moments. The study also considers that self-acceptance plays a crucial role in coping with past trauma, which varies greatly among individuals due to personal, social, and cultural influences (Idsoe et al., 2021; Švecová et



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al., 2023). According to Jiao (2023) bullying can lead to severe psychological effects, making it essential to explore victims' narratives to fully understand these impacts.

Bullying behavior significantly impacts victims across various levels. Psychologically, victims may experience heightened feelings of anger, embarrassment, grudges, low self-esteem, demotivation, nightmares, reduced psychological well-being, and increased anxiety, nervousness, stress, and depression. They may become more withdrawn, timid, antisocial, and have difficulty interacting with others, sometimes even experiencing suicidal thoughts, self-harm, or skipping school (Ahmed et al. 2022; Borualogo & Casas, 2019; Hana & Suwanti, 2019; Harahap & Saputri, 2019; Jelita et al. 2021). Physically, victims of physical bullying might suffer from injuries such as internal wounds, eye, tooth, or head injuries, which can lead to permanent disabilities like brain damage, amputation, or paralysis (Hillis et al. 2016). These studies collectively illustrate that bullying has profound psychological, physical, and developmental consequences.

Research indicates that childhood bullying can have long-lasting negative effects on victims' psychological, physical, and social well-being (Jantzer et al. 2022). It can create traumatic experiences, harming mental health and psychological stability (Bhatia, 2023; Dewi & Valentina, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Some studies also link bullying to the development of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Andreou et al., 2020; Dewi & Valentina, 2020; Idsoe et al., 2021; Ossa et al., 2019; Plexousakis et al., 2019). Socially, bullying can lead to poor parental relationships, few friends, social withdrawal, and distrust of others (Beccaria et al., 2022; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Victims are often associated with low self-esteem, shame, and negative self-perceptions (Beduna & Perrone-McGovern, 2019; Greene et al., 2014). While many studies focus on depression, anxiety, and PTSD, relatively little attention has been given to self-acceptance as a key aspect of psychological recovery. Further research is needed to explore how bullying experiences impact self-acceptance, which is vital for victims' psychological adjustment and recovery. Therefore, this study aims to examine how individuals who have experienced bullying describe their self-acceptance, emphasizing its importance in trauma recovery within the context of bullying.

## 2. Research Methods

This research employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach and was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The researcher reviewed victims' past experiences of bullying and their processes of self-acceptance regarding that behaviour. Data were collected using a purposive sampling method. Participants were required to have been victims of bullying and to have undergone a process of self-acceptance. Participants were those who had experienced bullying during school age and were currently at least adults. Data validity was supported by research reflexivity and member checking. The study included five participants. After data collection, the data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This study employed a qualitative approach using an IPA design, which aims to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals' subjective experiences and how they interpret those experiences. The analysis followed several stages: (1) repeatedly reading and understanding the transcripts, (2) making initial notes, (3) developing emerging themes, (4) grouping themes into superordinate themes, and (5) identifying patterns among participants. Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring data confidentiality and the protection of participants' rights.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Results

This study involved five participants who currently reside in Yogyakarta for their studies and work. They meet the criteria set by the researcher for participation. The participants, identified as RD, GK, KH, M, and A, all share a common background of having experienced bullying during their school years. Table 1 provides a demographic overview of each participant.

The data analysis reveals that self-acceptance in those who have faced bullying develops gradually rather than instantly. Consequently, the study identifies three main stages: (1) victims' past bullying experiences; (2) long-term effects of bullying and factors facilitating recovery; and (3) the self-acceptance phase, where positive experiences foster this acceptance. These stages are derived from thematic patterns in participants' interviews, illustrating a psychological process sequence leading to self-acceptance.

**Table 1.** Description of Research Participants

Initial	Age/ Gender	Occupation	Description
RD	28 Male	Photographer	RD has experienced bullying in the past, specifically in the school environment. The forms of bullying that RD received were verbal and physical.
GK	28 Male	Mine Administrator	GK has experienced bullying in the past, both at school and at home. The forms of bullying GK received were verbal and physical.
KH	25 Male	Part-time in media and technology	KH has experienced bullying in the past in both the school and home environments. The forms of bullying KH experienced were verbal, relational, and physical.
M	25 Female	College Student	M has experienced bullying in the past within the school environment. The forms of bullying M experienced were verbal, relational, and cyberbullying.
A	25 Female	College Student	A has experienced bullying in the past within the school environment. The forms of bullying A received were verbal and relational.

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**(1) Past experiences of the victim related to bullying experiences**

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During the early stages of self-acceptance, the researcher examines descriptions of past bullying experiences to understand how self-acceptance develops. This also seeks to address the research question: "What is the process through which victims of bullying come to accept their past experiences?" The research findings are then presented as follows:

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Based on interviews with five participants, it can be concluded that causes of bullying include differences in physical appearance of the victim, strange behavior, being targeted for jokes for the perpetrator's amusement, conformity, a sense of superiority, and a desire for power over others. This indicates that the main motivations of the perpetrators are seeking pleasure and asserting dominance.

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*"Maybe it's because he's fat, or maybe it's because of his strange behaviour. At first, it was a joke, and then I was pranked for a long time. Maybe I'm a bit strange. I'm a bit of a strange person, or something. So maybe it feels different. So it's different. Because it's considered different, it's bullied like that." - Participant KH.*

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*"Maybe it's because my friend doesn't like me, and then he teases other friends to stay away from me, or teases that D is like this, and so the others are distant." - Participant RD.*

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*"Maybe it's because I'm younger. If it's among friends, at that time it was the popular people who led it, in the sense that the people who were usually bullied were the unpopular, ordinary ones. Then, in the case of my neighbours, it was the same as with my friends: they felt superior, and I felt inferior. So yes, bullying." - Participant GK.*

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This study indicates that participants faced different types of bullying, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying. These included acts like physical violence, social ostracism, ridicule, being treated as a servant, being asked for money, having objects thrown at them, and cyberbullying, such as spreading rumors via social media.

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*"He never made a problem, but he once burned my pants while I was wearing them, sitting in a chair like this, until, fortunately, it didn't hit my skin." - Participant RD.*

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*"So the story is, when I approached my friend for no reason, they seemed to avoid me. They were clustered together, and I was shunned—I just felt it. Yes, every time I have an empty seat and my friend is there, I want to chat, but when I sit there, they immediately avoid me. I just approached the girls in front of the class. There was a chair I sat in, and they immediately dispersed, all of them, as if I had something, you know. Maybe it's because my friend doesn't like me, and then he encourages other friends to stay away from me, or encourages that D is like this, and then the others are far away." - Participant RD.*

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*"Then I usually throw my pencil box, play with it, and throw it around like that." - Participant KH.*

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*"Still, it is often insinuated on social media that if there is a problem, it is not immediately resolved properly. So high school students are enemies; sarcasm on social media; others bring friends; eventually, they bully each other. What started as a fight ended up as a story on social media — the era of BBM — so they made a story on BBM with insinuations; eventually, they insinuated back and forth. In class, there was no rebuke. Eh, I don't know why my friends have become enemies, enemies, far away. I'm also confused, you know, how come it's problematic*

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*with one other person defending this one, even though, if you look at it, I can't blame them either." - Participant M*

The results showed that bullying had numerous effects in the past. These encompassed reduced enthusiasm, social anxiety, feelings of isolation, diminished self-confidence, frequent crying, stress, falling grades, and reduced involvement in preferred activities. Participants also reported experiencing negative emotions like sadness, discomfort, fear, anxiety, anger, feeling down, upset, instability, and resentment.

*"Not comfortable. The discomfort stems from having no friends, so I feel lonely. There is no one to talk to. When I was in high school, I always sat alone, and no one wanted to sit next to me until I graduated." - Participant RD.*

*"Not confident, then afraid, anxious, really anxious. Anxious to do something, anything, is like being inhibited from doing anything." - Participant A*

*"The feeling that often arises is sadness. 'Why don't other people like me?'" - Participant M"*

Research indicates that each participant uses distinct coping strategies to deal with bullying. Participant RD retaliated in elementary school but later focused on excelling in non-academic activities during high school. Participant GK tried to praise and follow orders, occasionally crying as well. GK also confided in her mother and sought revenge against the bully. KH responded by informing his parents, suppressing his feelings, and attempting to fight back. Participants M and A mainly coped by telling their parents.

*"In elementary school, I would hit back. In elementary school, I fought almost every day. In elementary school, the solution was to retaliate if I were roughed up, but in the end I would cry to release the emotion." Participant RD*

*"Yes, I always try to think positively. My job here is to go to school, so I will keep going until I graduate. Anyway, I don't even complain, but I have to strengthen myself too, because whatever happens, treat yourself if it's a matter of thought. Positive thoughts, keep pushing positive thoughts. The spirit is there" - Participant RD.*

*"Sometimes I talk to my parents. Ah, once I talked to my parents, oh, this was about what you are snacking on — how come the money is 0, not earlier asked by my friend like that. You asked a friend, How many times have you asked? Yes, several times already. Then, wow, this is not it — don't do this. Then after that, my parents talked to his parents, and after that he didn't ask for money anymore." -Participant KH.*

The study highlights common traits among bullying perpetrators based on participants' reports. These perpetrators often encourage others to join, usually forming groups of three to five. This pattern indicates that bullying often results from conformity, as perpetrators try to avoid loneliness and thus motivate group involvement. Group dynamics appear to amplify aggressive behavior, since individuals tend to feel more confident when acting together than alone. Furthermore, being in a group can sustain the cycle of violence, especially against particular victims.

*"This is what they call a joke, and then he gets carried away in his heart, and then he continues to provoke and invite friends." - Participant RD.*

*"Never alone. There must be someone, meaning he is with his friends, not one by one. There is a group there, but it is their group. As far as I know, there is more than one of them, never one by one, never." - Participant GK.*

This study explores the self-acceptance process among victims of bullying by examining their past experiences. The interview findings indicate that bullying often arises from the victim's physical or behavioral differences, the bully's desire for amusement, conformity, feelings of superiority, and lust for power. Victims face various types of bullying—including physical, verbal, relational, and cyber—which lead to lowered morale, social withdrawal, stress, and negative emotions. To cope, participants used a range of strategies, such as retaliating, seeking parental support, or excelling in non-academic activities. The behavior of bullies, who tend to form groups and provoke others, suggests a desire for conformity that fuels their aggressive actions.

**(2) Long-term impacts of bullying behavior and factors that support individuals to move on from past experiences**

At this stage, the study explores participants' experiences and the effects of bullying. It also seeks to answer the research question, "What is the long-term impact of bullying behavior and what factors help individuals move beyond their past experiences?" This question aims to understand

how participants navigate their journey toward acceptance. The following section presents the research findings, among other insights. 212  
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The interview results reveal various ways people respond to unpleasant experiences. These responses include perceiving the situation as unfair, experiencing negative events, feeling unlucky, being in a vulnerable position, feeling annoyed, finding things funny, or feeling ridiculous. 214  
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*"It's just that those who are naughtier than I am are even more accepted. I've actually never been naughty; he's the one who is the naughtiest, in my opinion. How come his actions are still accepted? It's like I don't think it's fair for my life." - Participant RD.* 217  
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*"I just interpret it as a bad experience, in the sense that I feel I was unlucky to experience something like that." - Participant GK* 220  
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*"Funny, just funny, ha ha. What is it? Why is it? It's just funny. In the end, it's not what. I'm in a good relationship with those who have bullied me, so I'm friends with them too. Yes, it's just a funny feeling when I think about it. It's funny when I think about it again, oya, I was bullied." - Participant KH* 222  
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The study results revealed several future impacts of bullying on participants. Participant RD became less confident and felt uncomfortable if not heard. Participant GK grew unsympathetic towards his family and more cautious when choosing friends. Participant KH experienced insecurity, avoided standing out, and was selective in friends. Participant M was traumatized by group work, reluctant to pursue a career in education, triggered by social media, and needed psychiatric medication when past memories and emotions resurfaced. Additionally, participant A sometimes felt upset when recalling the event. 226  
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*"Yes, in terms of the impact, after high school I felt less confident because I had no one to talk to. I was less confident about speaking up in front of people." - Participant RD.* 233  
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*"For me personally, I became less empathetic by sympathising with my own family. In other words, even though my cousin has something wrong, I also don't really care." - Participant GK* 235  
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*"At that time, it was actually sad, right, and it even carried over until I went to college. So, to this day, whenever the lecturer says, 'Please choose your own group,' I don't like that. I prefer to be chosen." - Participant M.* 238  
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The interview results indicated that participants employed various coping strategies to handle the effects of past bullying. These included maintaining a positive attitude, engaging with friends and new acquaintances, being more open, socializing to meet new people, and making future plans to avoid dwelling on negative thoughts. 241  
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*"Yes, in my opinion, the strategy is to keep thinking positively. Because mental, mental, and psychological health is what determines oneself." - Participant RD* 245  
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*"Yes, the point is that I still want to interact with whom. Then, over time, there is a match, and finally, they continue to interact." - Participant GK.* 247  
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*"So I try to mingle, be friendly, and try to get to know new people, be brave. I didn't dare to get acquainted before, now I dare to get acquainted with new friends, new people, add friends, add relationships, like now it's very different in my opinion." - Participant M* 249  
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Based on the interviews, each participant receives social support or other motivating factors during instances of bullying. Participant RD was helped by a teacher who intervened during a fight, a friend who assisted him with academic difficulties, and support from friends at his current workplace. Participant GK received help from his father after being pushed until he fell. Participant KH was supported by parents who reported his bullying to the school and by parents who met with the perpetrator's parents, as well as friends who helped him during bullying incidents. Additionally, participant M received support from his ex-girlfriend at school, attentive teachers, and guidance from his parents. Similarly, participant A was supported by his parents, close friends, and friends in his current environment. 252  
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*"The help is in the academic field, for example, if there is a difficult assignment, I ask for help; it is only my close friend who wants to help, the others don't want to help." - Participant RD.* 261  
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*"My parents told me how come you don't buy anything, but the money is gone, oh, the money is not given. Oh well, how many times have you given it? I don't know, I forgot. Yes, I finally met his parents." - Participant KH.* 264  
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*"The support is actually still the same, it's more about the support of parents, which is the most, yes, you can say that I got stressed, yes, it's true, often to the point of wanting to end my life, to the point of wanting to commit suicide." - Participant M*

This study explored the long-term effects of bullying and the factors that aid in recovery. Participants' initial reactions to bullying ranged from feelings of unfairness and luckiness to annoyance, amusement, and silliness. Over time, impacts included reduced self-confidence, challenges in relationships, academic trauma, and emotional triggers. To manage these effects, participants used positive coping mechanisms such as staying optimistic, engaging in social activities, and being open. Support from teachers, family, friends, and coworkers was vital in helping them move forward and accept their past experiences.

**(3) Period of self-acceptance: An individual's positive experiences can trigger and support self-acceptance.**

At this stage, individuals have embraced their own identity. The discussion of these findings addresses the research question: "How can positive personal experiences promote and reinforce self-acceptance?" The following explains the results observed at this stage:

The results indicated that participants viewed their past experiences positively. Participant RD reflected on his experience, deriving positive value from it and emphasizing the importance of having a stance and not letting the experience determine a future without resilience. Participant GK developed greater empathy for bullying victims, regarded her experience as a lesson, felt fortunate that it did not turn into trauma, became more cautious socially, and appreciated her improved understanding of bullying. Participant KH grew more confident in defending herself and learned from the experience. Participant M became more introspective and grateful for her supportive parents. Lastly, participant A expressed increased gratitude for what he has.

*"The past is not the end of everything, so it doesn't mean that we are at the bottom and continue to be at the bottom; it turns out that people from the bottom can actually rise to the top because they try to change it all." - Participant RD.*

*"Maybe you can be more sympathetic to victims who experience bullying." - Participant GK.*

The interviews showed that each participant improved after successfully accepting themselves. The self-improvement took the form of increased self-confidence, greater openness and a more easy-going approach, feeling better than before, and feeling great because they could get past bullying. These changes led to better social relationships and increased motivation to achieve desired goals.

*"I am now more confident when chatting with people I don't know, yes, then I am also more confident when I chat, I mean getting acquainted, then I am brave enough to talk to people..." - Participant RD.*

*"Yes, I think it means that I'm great at getting through those phases." - Participant A*

Based on the research interview results, each participant has a motivating factor for getting up each day. Participant RD relies on his non-academic skills, builds new relationships, continues doing positive actions, maintains a healthy environment, receives support from coworkers, and upholds personal standards. Participant GK views her experience with bullying as a thing of the past, does not dwell on it, and has made new friends. Likewise, participant KH tries to forget the past, considers it irrelevant, and seeks new friendships. Participant M aims to find peace by letting go of resentment, forgiving the perpetrator, and staying self-motivated. Lastly, participant A prefers not to focus on the past, and sees her parents as a source of strength and motivation to move forward.

*"So I used to have a choir at school, so I used to join the choir. Then, in the competitions, it turns out that I'm not that bad, I mean, I have advantages in other fields." - Participant RD.*

*"Okay, why do you need to feel reconciled? Because what's the point of holding a grudge, right?" - Participant M*

The interviews showed how participants felt after overcoming the bullying period. Their emotions included happiness, calmness, pride, a sense of freedom, forgiveness, and comfort in their new environment.

*"The feeling is pleased, because yes, with the past experiences that were not good, I think there must be a time when we will be happy." - Participant RD.*

*"Positively, when we can accept it, it's easier not to hold grudges." - Participant M.*

The interview results reveal the participants' future relationships with the bully. Participant RD was still greeted when they met, while participant KH remained friends with the perpetrator. Participant M started to develop a good relationship with the perpetrator, and participant A reported no issues when encountering the perpetrator. However, participant GK admitted that he no longer wished to interact with the perpetrators.

*"Yes, no. I never had any feelings of hatred. My feeling is that if I meet the perpetrator, I greet them nicely." - Participant RD.*

*"But whether I want to be on good terms with the people there, I also still think, with those involved with those people, if possible, I also don't have anything to do, it's better not to get involved." - Participant GK.*

The results indicated that participants are optimistic about their future. Participant RD aims to enhance his quality of life, GK hopes for a better life, KH wishes to avoid bullying and make friends quickly, M is focused on achieving his goals, and A expresses a desire to keep looking forward.

*"My hope after accepting myself is that I can improve myself to the maximum." - Participant RD.*

*"Certainly, there is because I want to achieve my goals, right from the beginning, from the problem. I was initially confused about what major I wanted to go to, until finally my mother advised me to take psychology." – Participant M*

The study revealed that those who embraced themselves after being bullied tend to see their past experiences positively, framing them as valuable lessons that fostered personal growth. This growth encompassed increased self-confidence, greater open-mindedness, and heightened motivation to pursue goals, facilitated by non-academic skills, social support, and a positive outlook. Once they accepted themselves, participants experienced happiness, calmness, and pride, which helped them build better relationships with bullies, forgive them, and maintain optimistic hopes for their future.

### 3.2. Discussion

Based on the research findings, this study's results are summarized in Table 2 to offer a clearer overview of the self-acceptance dynamics among individuals who have experienced bullying.

**Table 2.** The Dynamics of Self-Acceptance in Bullying Victims

Process	Findings
The victim's past experiences related to bullying	Victims' perceptions of what causes bullying. Forms of bullying experienced by participants The impact of past bullying Coping strategies for dealing with bullying Characteristics of bullies
The Long-Term Effects of Bullying and Factors That Help Individuals Recover from Past Experiences	Reflection on or making sense of unpleasant experiences from the past The long-term effects of past bullying Coping strategies for dealing with the effects of past bullying Social support as a protective factor against the effects of bullying
Self-acceptance: Positive personal experiences can trigger and foster self-acceptance	A positive interpretation of past experiences with bullying Positive changes after coming to terms with past experiences of bullying Factors that encourage individuals to come to terms with the past Emotional well-being after being free from bullying Perceptions of and reactions toward the perpetrator after the victim is freed from bullying A sense of optimism after coming to terms with an unpleasant experience

The table shows that developing self-acceptance in bullying victims occurs through several stages. It starts with the initial experience of being bullied, then progresses through understanding that experience and its long-term impact, and finally reaches self-acceptance. Each stage involves unique psychological processes influenced by various internal and external factors. These results indicate that self-acceptance does not happen instantly but is a result of a complex journey of adapting to and interpreting experiences. The three stages form a sequence: beginning with the first encounter with bullying, then making sense of it, and ultimately achieving self-acceptance. This progression is detailed in Table 2.

This study presents the development of self-acceptance among individuals who have faced bullying. The process is divided into three stages: the first stage is the initial phase, involving the experience of bullying behavior, during which researchers examine the victim's past related experiences. The second stage occurs after the bullying experience, focusing on the long-term impacts and the factors that help individuals recover. The final stage is self-acceptance, where positive experiences serve as catalysts and support for embracing oneself.

The initial process examines the causes of bullying, the negative emotions experienced, the impact of bullying from the victim's perspective, coping strategies, and the characteristics of perpetrators. The study found several reasons why perpetrators commit acts of bullying; some participants reported that perpetrators targeted victims with different physical and behavioural characteristics. According to Yosep et al. (2023), bullying behaviour occurs because of differences such as race, religion, and physical characteristics. Supporting this statement, Tristão et al. (2020) found that those who consider their physical appearance different are more likely to be bullied. In line with that, in this study, other physical characteristics are also cited as reasons for perpetrators to commit bullying. That initial emotional response then influences how individuals process and interpret their bullying experiences in subsequent stages.

There are several reasons why perpetrators engage in bullying, including a desire for power, conformity, feelings of superiority, anger, and mocking others. According to research by Serafin and Czarkowska-Pączek (2019), bullying often stems from seniority dynamics in environments, especially affecting juniors. The study also notes that behaviors such as ridicule or sarcasm frequently occur via social media. This aligns with earlier research indicating that environmental and social factors, along with social media, play significant roles in bullying (Ahmed et al. 2022). These varied experiences influence how individuals perceive themselves and their surroundings.

Participants' experience of bullying can trigger a range of negative emotions. According to the study, they reported feelings such as sadness, discomfort, fear, anxiety, annoyance, despair, anger, feeling very down, upset, resentment, disappointment, and hatred. Research by Arnout et al. (2020) indicates that feeling sad due to bullying can initiate a cycle of negative emotions, leading to decreased motivation and interest in academic activities, often resulting from perceived rejection by peers and the environment (Arnout et al., 2020; Tarafa et al., 2022). This emotional response significantly influences how individuals interpret their bullying experiences.

Bullying has significant effects on participants, who may feel discouraged from attending school, afraid to interact, and struggle to make friends. It can lead to feelings of being left out, low self-confidence, crying after school, stress, withdrawal, obsessive thoughts about the bullying, declining grades, fear, anxiety, and hampered activities. Previous research also indicates that bullying can decrease self-esteem, increase nervousness, anxiety, depression, encourage withdrawal and timidity, and make it difficult to socialize. It may even lead to suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and school avoidance behaviors (Ahmed et al. 2022; Borualogo & Casas, 2019; Hana & Suwari, 2019; Harahap & Saputri, 2019; Jelita et al. 2021). Studies further show that bullies tend to act in groups, driven by a desire to dominate and exert power over others (Beltrão et al., 2023; Forsberg & Horton, 2022; Maydon et al., 2023; Sağın et al., 2022; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020).

After leaving school, victims of bullying often still face long-lasting effects, as shown in Yosep et al. (2023), where bullying can negatively impact mental health over time. These long-term effects include anxiety, low confidence, nervousness when speaking publicly, increased caution in choosing friends, trauma triggered by social media posts about bullying, and feelings of upset when recalling past events. Some victims have even sought psychiatric help to cope with trauma. Overall, the development of self-acceptance among bullying victims is a gradual psychological process. Their experiences provoke negative emotions like sadness, fear, and anger, which lead them to reflect on what happened. Through reflection, they begin to understand their past, identify the causes of the bullying, and develop coping strategies. Over time, this understanding helps them view their experiences more positively and fosters self-acceptance.

After enduring these times, victims of bullying can reach self-acceptance. The final phase is self-acceptance, where individuals develop a positive view of themselves. Six themes emerged from this stage: positive meaning, hope for the future, progress after acceptance, feelings following the bullying experience, and improved relationships with the perpetrator later on. According to Ryff's framework, as discussed in Koburtay et al. (2023), self-acceptance is a key factor in psychological well-being. In Ryff's model, self-acceptance forms the foundation for a meaningful and satisfying life (Matud et al., 2019; Sin et al., 2024). It promotes psychological health through positive self-reflection, a balanced outlook on life, and the development of positive emotions like satisfaction and well-being (Gita & Eva, 2023). Making sense of experiences plays a crucial role by allowing

individuals to recall and reinterpret their experiences, thereby making their meanings more adaptive and fostering self-acceptance.

Individuals who accept themselves tend to interpret their experiences positively, often deriving valuable lessons from the past. According to Pabian et al. (2022), adults who have faced bullying and perceive a positive impact from these experiences tend to have better mental health and well-being compared to those who do not find the positive side of their experiences. Lidberg et al. (2024) found that victimization and bullying can help individuals create meaning, transforming negative experiences into motivation for survival and personal growth.

In this study, participants reported that accepting themselves led to personal improvements, such as increased confidence, openness, and relaxation. They see self-acceptance as a way to achieve goals and value themselves as capable of overcoming challenges. Gavín-Chocano et al. (2024) found that accepting oneself and one's circumstances can enhance emotional well-being.

Self-acceptance is influenced by various factors, including encouragement to succeed, strong relationships, environmental support, workplace backing, and resilience during tough times. There is also a drive to reconcile with the past and find motivation to succeed, proving that overcoming adversity is possible. Prior research indicates that self-acceptance enhances emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and overall mental health (Niu et al., 2022). In line with this, Kim et al. (2022) highlight that self-acceptance is crucial in forming positive relationships, fostering feelings of love and support. These factors can be divided into internal factors, like emotional regulation and mindset, and external factors, such as social support and environmental influences, all of which impact recovery and growth.

Once victims of bullying are able to accept themselves, they often experience more positive emotions and personal growth. For instance, they may feel happier, calmer, and proud, and they can move away from feelings of resentment. Self-acceptance boosts feelings of pleasure and satisfaction, which are vital for overall well-being and life satisfaction (Cordaro et al., 2024). Additionally, self-acceptance can foster healthier future relationships with the perpetrator. Participants reported that they had reconciled with the bully, and some even forgave one another. However, some also felt that, despite reconciliation, they still needed to restrict their interactions. Supporting this, Putra and Dendup (2022) found that choosing to reconcile with a bully can be beneficial for well-being, reducing stress and anxiety among victims.

This study offers a comprehensive overview of the self-acceptance process among victims of bullying by outlining the stages individuals go through. However, it has limitations, including a small sample size and a qualitative approach based on subjective experiences, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the study adds valuable insights to psychology, especially counseling and clinical psychology, by enhancing understanding of how self-acceptance develops in bullying victims. These insights can serve as a basis for creating interventions that foster self-acceptance as part of psychological healing. After accepting themselves, participants tend to hold positive expectations, such as hopes of reducing bullying in the future, improving themselves, and dreams of becoming psychologists to help others facing similar struggles and support their goals. Consistent with Kim et al. (2022), this supports the idea that self-acceptance encourages goal achievement.

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the reviewed research, the acceptance process comprises several stages. The researcher categorizes the dynamics into three phases: the initial stage, where victims' past experiences with bullying are recalled; the subsequent stage, which describes the aftermath of bullying, including its long-term effects and factors that help individuals recover; and the final stage, where individuals achieve self-acceptance.

Before reaching self-acceptance, individuals undergo various processes. Initially, they encounter difficult times, such as experiencing bullying, negative emotions, and consequences like fear of school and social interactions. At this stage, fear dominates due to past school bullying experiences.

In the middle stage, unpleasant experiences and effects continue during school. These include social anxiety, difficulty opening up, low self-confidence, nervousness in public speaking, and sometimes seeking psychiatric help. These long-term impacts influence daily life. Factors that support future self-acceptance include effective coping strategies, motivation, social support, and the capacity to reflect and learn from past experiences.

The final stage is self-acceptance, which is linked to positive personal experiences that foster self-acceptance among victims. These stages demonstrate how life experiences over time promote acceptance. Those who accept themselves view their lives with positivity, set hopeful goals, and tend to influence others positively.

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### **Suggestion**

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This research examines the process of self-acceptance, with future studies likely to explore bullying experiences in greater detail. While this study centers on bullying during school years, subsequent research can investigate other contexts such as workplaces, communities, or family environments. It could also focus on specific backgrounds like culture, gender, and socioeconomic status to gain deeper insights. Additionally, improving data collection methods—such as choosing more suitable locations is necessary.

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Family support must be enhanced to help children facing bullying. Parents and families should understand the risks of bullying and take proactive steps, including early education about morals and the dangers associated with bullying behaviors.

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The findings of this study aim to provide an overview of the effects of bullying experiences and highlight the significance of self-acceptance for those affected. Psychoeducational programs and bullying intervention strategies are expected to reduce future risks and support those impacted. Furthermore, this research underscores the need to strengthen anti-bullying policies and implement preventive measures within schools. Social support from teachers and educational institutions is critical in addressing and preventing more severe consequences for bullying victims. Schools can also introduce programs that foster positive peer interactions and create a supportive school climate to promote student well-being. Teachers should remain attentive to students' needs and offer special assistance to those who experience bullying.

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**Conceptualization:** First Author, Second Author; **methodology:** First Author, Second Author; **investigation:** First Author, **writing—original draft preparation:** First Author, **writing—review and editing:** First Author, Second Author; **visualization:** First Author, Second Author. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Conflict of interest**

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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