Autism and cyberbullying: a personal perspective

I have been on social media for about 15 years now and use it to raise awareness of autism and my campaigning work. About four years ago I started to get constantly “trolled”, day in, day out. Then later, the abuse came onto Twitter in the form of trolling, abuse, hate speech, impersonation and imposters.

The worst aspect for me is Twitter cloning and impersonation. For me, it’s like identity theft. When someone clones your profile and pretends to be you, there’s nothing worse than this, but for me when I got this type of abuse, which I reported to Twitter, it took them several weeks to close down the imposter’s account. It’s got that bad I've even had to involve the police and have logged several hate crime incidents over the years.

Social media sites such as Facebook and other platforms have verified and protected my accounts online, but sadly Twitter refuses to protect my safety online. I feel they have a moral responsibility to protect their users but this has not happened for me. I've involved and asked my member of parliament (MP), the police, crime commissioner and even celebrities to write to Twitter asking them to verify my account, but Twitter came back to say I don’t meet the eligibility criteria. The truth is I am a high profile campaigner in the U.K. as well as an author, and what I really can’t get my head around is that other campaigners like me, like Shy Keenan and Denise Fergus, who have received abuse online have subsequently had their Twitter accounts verified and protected by Twitter.

Lots of people tell me, “Well Kevin, if Twitter verified your account, you will still get cloned and impersonation and abuse.” Well, yes this is true; however, if my account is verified then at least people will know who the real “Kevin Healey” is. I’ve also been told “just close your Twitter account down”. Social media is a good communication tool for me as an autistic adult - I don’t want to stop using it because of trolls and abuse.

Over the last two years, I’ve been interviewed twice by Sky News, the Mail, Independent, BBC and ITV about my abuse online, and national newspapers about the abuse and internet trolls.
My advice is not to feed the trolls; instead, starve them of oxygen, block, report, mute them. If it's serious then contact the police and log it as a hate crime.

I’ve spoken to ministers and MP’s in Parliament on several occasions about cyberbullying. I made a documentary on cyberbullying, which was screened in various locations across the UK, and I’ve also spoken at the Autism Show, and at schools and colleges about cyberbullying.

It's difficult for people with autism to switch off from this type of abuse because it stays with you 24/7. People on the spectrum can be affected by cyberbullying or even mate crime in school. It's important to tell somebody if you’re been bullied, either cyberbullying or physical bullying - don't suffer in silence. Tell someone; a teacher, best friend or family member. Never keep it to yourself - this can be an isolating place and it's important to speak out and tell others.

Bullying can affect anyone - I’m 41 and still going through it. Never feel alone, but most importantly, don't respond to the trolls/ bullies. The best approach is to ignore the bullying, record the evidence and keep a diary log of the incidents.