THE ROOT OF ONLINE TROLLING IS SHAME

Why Hurt People Hurt People (And How to Stop the Cycle)

By Jazmine L. Ramzy

My old neighbor Sarah had an anonymous Instagram account.

A finsta, they call it. Fake Instagram.

Her real account was polished. Positive. The version of herself she wanted the world to see.

But the finsta?

That's where she let the OTHER her out.

The petty her. The judgmental her. The one who had OPINIONS about the mom-influencers with their perfect morning routines and color-coordinated kids.

She told me about it one afternoon over coffee, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I'd scroll. See a post. Feel that familiar pang," she said.

Must be nice to have a nanny.

Of course she looks like that--she clearly doesn't work.

Those kids are DEFINITELY miserable. She's just performing for the gram.

Not on her real account. Never there.

"Must be nice to have a rich husband. Some of us actually parent our own kids."

She'd feel... POWERFUL.

For about 30 seconds.

Then gross.

But she'd do it again the next day.

Because the truth she didn't want to face was this:

Sarah didn't hate them because they were fake.

She hated them because she was.

She felt like a failure. And the only way she knew how to cope was to tear others down.

THE RESEARCH: WHO TROLLS AND WHY

For years, we thought trolls were just "bad people." Sociopaths. Narcissists. People who enjoyed cruelty for fun.

Turns out, research tells a much more nuanced (and human) story.

In 2014, psychologists Erin Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus published a landmark study in *Personality and Individual Differences* titled "Trolls Just Want to Have Fun," measuring what they called the "Dark Tetrad" of traits:

- **Sadism** (enjoying others' pain)

- **Psychopathy** (lack of empathy)

- **Machiavellianism** (manipulation)

- **Narcissism** (inflated self-importance)

They found that people high in ALL FOUR traits were more likely to troll.

Particularly sadism, they concluded: trolling behavior is inherently sadistic.

Case closed, right? Trolls are just terrible people.

Except that's not the WHOLE story.

Stanford psychologist Dr. Justin Cheng, in a follow-up study in 2017, found something surprising:

ANYONE can become a troll under the right conditions.

Specifically, when they're in a bad mood AND they see trolling happening (it's contagious).

Trolling, Dr. Cheng argues, is a BEHAVIOR--not a personality type--that can emerge when people need to discharge negative emotions onto others.

And I'd guess that emotion driving most trolling is shame.

SHAME: THE EMOTION WE'LL DO ANYTHING TO ESCAPE

Researcher Brené Brown defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."

Guilt says: "I DID something bad."

Shame says: "I AM bad."

Shame is UNBEARABLE. So we'll do anything to get rid of it.

Healthy ways to cope:

- Speak about it out loud in a safe space

- Process it in therapy

- Practice self-compassion

- Make amends if we've harmed someone

Unhealthy ways to cope--Projection:

- Make someone ELSE carry the shame

- Put others down to feel superior

- Convince ourselves WE'RE not the problem (THEY are)

- Hide behind anonymity

Online trolling checks all these boxes.

It's the PERFECT system for shame discharge:

- Anonymity (no one knows "the real you")

- Distance ("I'm just telling the truth" behind a username)

- The internet REWARDS engagement, even cruel engagement. Retweets. Shares. People pile on.

- You feel SEEN, HEARD, and RIGHTEOUS

In that moment, you feel powerful--instead of powerless.

THE TRUTH SARAH DIDN'T WANT TO FACE

When her therapist asked why she trolled, Sarah said:

"I don't know. To vent, I guess. To say what everyone's REALLY thinking but is too polite to say."

"Angry at what?" the therapist asked.

That was easy to answer. And hard to live with.

Sarah KNEW the anger flooding her wasn't about the influencers at all.

It was about HERSELF.

She was a mom who meditated on her phone app while her kids screamed.

She was overwhelmed.

She felt LESS THAN.

There's envy underneath her contempt. She didn't feel good enough. So she attacked THEM.

THE PIPELINE: FROM SHAME-HATRED TO CRUELTY

Here's how shame became cruelty for Sarah:

STEP 1: THE BETRAYAL

Something goes wrong in her life. A broken dream. A dashed promotion. Hard work that goes unnoticed.

What's wrong with me? Why can't I DO this? Why can't I be like THEM?

STEP 2: COMPARISON (THE TRIGGER)

She sees it--an entrepreneur couple on Instagram. Perfect. Put-together. Thriving.

STEP 3: ENVY

They don't deserve it. It's not FAIR.

STEP 4: LETTING ENVY TURN TOXIC

This is where the fork in the road happens.

STEP 5: RAGE (Shame in Disguise)

How DARE they flaunt their success when I'm struggling? They're so smug. They're inadequate parents. Fake. Performative.

STEP 6: DEHUMANIZATION

Now she can justify:

"They're not real. They're just attention-seekers."

Now she has PERMISSION.

STEP 7: COLLATERAL ENGAGEMENT

She leaves a digital insult. A passive-aggressive comment. A quote-tweet bomb.

She feels powerful.

THE WORST COMMENT SARAH EVER LEFT

The worst moment, Sarah told me, came years ago. It taught her something she'll never forget.

There was this woman. Maybe 25. Homeschools her 3 kids from home. Works from home. Posts about her morning routine--waking at 5 a.m. for yoga, journaling, her gratitude practice.

Sarah HATED her.

(Or so she told herself behind the mask. Bubble bath. Candles. The whole aesthetic.)

At the time, Sarah was drowning in responsibilities. Working full-time, taking care of aging parents, trying to keep her own family afloat.

She hit send on the comment and kept scrolling.

She didn't think about it again. She felt justified. She moved on to the next post.

Then, the woman left a response:

I almost didn't post today. But I'm glad I did. Thank you.

Clap back?

Delete and block me?

Sarah was WRECKED.

Because the woman wasn't her enemy. And Sarah cried for days.

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MONTHS later, Sarah learned something else about that stranger:

SHE was the one struggling. **SHE** was posting to keep herself together.

Sarah had no idea.

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SHAME IS CONTAGIOUS

In 2016, researchers found that negativity spreads online like a virus.

After analyzing millions of posts on forums, they found:

- Normal posts = 35% would generate negativity

- Negative posts people had JUST seen doubled the likelihood they'd post something negative the next day, like a contagion

"It's like a game," one researcher said. "You see it first, then you DO it."

Transmitting shame. Becoming the bully.

This is why "cancel culture" spirals so fast--it's a shame-fueled frenzy, a societal pile-on.

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THE ANATOMY OF A CANCEL CULTURE PILE-ON

SCENARIO: A celebrity says something tone-deaf.

PHASE 1: THE CALLOUT

Someone quote-tweets it: *"This is incredibly harmful."*

Legitimate? Yes. Real harm happened. Someone from [exact demographic] deserves to feel heard. They deserve a platform for their pain.

Still, it becomes deeply PERSONAL:

"Look, I've been saying [celebrity] was problematic."

"Of COURSE they said this."

"I always knew [celebrity] was [violent accusation based on one statement]."

PHASE 2: THE MOB FEELS JUSTIFIED

The person becomes a SYMBOL of everything wrong--not a person anymore. Symbols don't bleed.

SHAME SAYS: "I'M GOOD. THEY'RE ALWAYS BAD."

The mob ALWAYS CLAIMS they're being "HONEST," justified.

"I'm just keeping it real."

"Someone needed to say it."

But here's the distinction Sarah finally made between criticism and cruelty--and why:

Criticism is delivered as "I disagree with your approach" or "Here's why this is harmful."

Cruelty labels the person as worthless: "You're an idiot. An awful parent. Half the person you pretend to be."

One invites dialogue. The other invites destruction.

As Harriet Lerner writes in *Why Won't You Apologize?*: "Blame is simply the discharging of discomfort and pain. It has an inverse relationship with accountability."

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN SARAH STOPPED

After Sarah deleted her finsta, she felt TERRIBLE.

Guilty. Ashamed. Exposed.

How many people did she hurt?

Could she undo it? (She couldn't.)

But here's what CHANGED:

She decided to become a different person.

STEP 1. NO MORE ANONYMOUS ACCOUNTS

Everything goes under her NAME.

STEP 2. TRANSFORM RAGE INTO CURIOSITY

When she feels triggered, she asks: *"Why does this bother me? What's the variance here? What part of me does it touch (envy, fear, inadequacy)?"*

STEP 3. SPEAK IT OUT LOUD

Not to the internet. To her body. To her real life. Tell her therapist. Her partner. A trusted friend about what happened that week.

Week 1: She felt EXPOSED. But STRONGER.

Noticing the feelings. Answering them. Giving them 5 minutes instead of a cruel post.

She'd go for a walk. She'd listen to loud music. Baby steps toward healing.

STEP 4: MY CRUELTY ONLINE COMPLETELY STOPPED

Sarah signed off Instagram for 3 months and just listened to herself.

She started to think differently:

"If I saw this post and felt passive-aggressive about it..."

"Do I actually want to mock this person's choice?"

"Is this unsolicited cruelty delivered under the guise of 'being real'?"

If you're wondering how to be better, here's her advice:

STEP 1: NOTICE THE IMPULSE

STEP 2: PAUSE

STEP 3: ASK THESE QUESTIONS

- Am I trying to HURT someone?

- What am I feeling right now? What's the REAL FEELING beneath this?

STEP 4: ADDRESS THE SOURCE

- Journal about YOUR feelings

- Talk to someone you trust

STEP 5: IF YOU MUST ENGAGE, CHOOSE KINDNESS

Ask yourself: Is this absolutely necessary?

If no, don't engage.

If yes, use critique, empathy, or GRACE.

IF YOU'VE BEEN TROLLED

1. REMEMBER: IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU

It never was. It was about them and their pain.

2. TELL SOMEONE YOU TRUST

Don't suffer alone. Their shame is THEIRS. It's not valid. You are.

3. ASK YOURSELF WHY IT HURT

Sometimes trolls unintentionally voice our deepest insecurities. That doesn't make them right--but understanding why it stung can help you heal.

4. PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

You are not "too sensitive." You're human. The world needs your voice.

THE WORLD WE CREATE WITH WHAT WE SAY

Imagine a world where people paused when triggered.

Where cruelty wasn't REWARDED.

Where we asked, "What hurts inside me?" instead of "How can I hurt them back?"

That world starts with people like Sarah.

People like you. People like me.

Curiosity instead of contempt.

Connection instead of cruelty.

Calling IN instead of calling OUT.

Grace instead of grenades.

An INVITATION instead of an attack.

Empathy over ego.

FINAL WORD

Sarah isn't perfect. Neither am I. Neither are you.

But as Sarah learned, it changes everything when we realize:

Hurt people hurt people.

And healed people? They heal people.

The question is: which one do you want to be?

Jazmine L. Ramzy is a writer, recovering people-pleaser, and someone still learning how to be kind--to others and to herself.