



SHAME · ONLINE BEHAVIOR · HEALING

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. 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 one who had opinions about the mom-influencers with their perfect morning routines and color-coordinated kids.

She'd scroll, feel that familiar pang of envy, and leave a cruel comment from behind the mask. She'd feel powerful for about 30 seconds. Then gross. But she'd do it again the next day.

"Sarah didn't hate them because they were fake. She hated them because she felt like she was. 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. Research tells a more nuanced and human story. Stanford psychologist Dr. Justin Cheng found something surprising: **anyone can become a troll under the right conditions**. Two key factors: a bad mood and seeing others being negative first.

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. And shame is unbearable — so we'll do anything to discharge it.

Online trolling is the perfect system for shame discharge: anonymity, distance, and an internet that rewards engagement — even cruel engagement. In that moment, you feel powerful instead of powerless.

THE PIPELINE: FROM SHAME TO CRUELTY

Step 1: Something goes wrong in your life.

A broken dream. A dashed promotion. Hard work that goes unnoticed. The inner voice begins: *What's wrong with me? Why can't I be like THEM?*

Step 2: You see someone thriving.

An entrepreneur couple on Instagram. Perfect. Put-together. And it triggers the comparison.

Step 3: Envy becomes toxic.

Instead of asking what the envy reveals about your own unlived desires, the rage takes over. *How DARE they flaunt their success when I'm struggling? They're fake. Performative. They don't deserve it.*

Step 4: Dehumanization.

"They're not real. They're just attention-seekers." Now you have permission. Now cruelty feels justified.

Step 5: The comment.

You leave a digital insult. A passive-aggressive comment. A quote-tweet. You feel righteous. For about 30 seconds.

THE WORST COMMENT SARAH EVER LEFT

She left a cruel comment on a stranger's post. The woman responded: *"I almost didn't post today. But I'm glad I did. Thank you."* Sarah was wrecked. Because the woman wasn't her enemy. The woman was struggling too — posting to keep herself together. Sarah had no idea. And she cried for days.

"Criticism is: 'I disagree with your approach.' Cruelty labels the person as worthless. One invites dialogue. The other invites destruction."

HOW TO STOP THE CYCLE

When you feel the urge to troll:

Notice the impulse. **Pause** before you post. **Ask**: Am I trying to hurt someone? What am I actually feeling right now? What's the real feeling beneath this? **Address** the source — journal, talk to someone you trust, go for a walk.

If you must engage at all, ask: *"Is this criticism or cruelty? Would I say this with my real name attached?"*

If you've been trolled:

Remember: it's not about you. It never was. It was about them and their unprocessed pain. Tell someone you trust. Practice self-compassion. You are not too sensitive. The world needs your voice.

"Imagine a world where people paused when triggered. Where we asked 'What hurts inside me?' instead of 'How can I hurt them back?' That world starts with people like you."

*Jazmine L. Ramzy is a writer exploring the intersection of shame, technology, and human connection. Her forthcoming book, *Shut The F**k Up*, includes a chapter on how online cruelty is always rooted in offline pain. Follow her at @jlashae on X.*

Have you ever left a comment you regretted? What were you really feeling in that moment? The answer is the beginning of freedom. → jazmineramzy.com