I’m going to give you the descriptions of a couple celebrities and then I want you to guess who it is before I tell you. First, she was a white girl born in Louisville, Kentucky. As a kid, she was involved in many hobbies but eventually found that her true passion was acting. To date, she has lead roles in movies including the very popular Hunger Games. Who is she? Jennifer Lawrence. Second, he was an African-American boy growing up in Honolulu, Hawaii. His parents went through many divorces and remarriages when he was a kid, but after he graduated college he still went on to work to help people in poverty. He is now a major US politician. Give me a guess. (Choose people until someone guesses Obama) Yep, our president, Barak Obama. Then there’s me; I was an average fifth grader, lots of friends, good grades, involved in sports, living in the city I grew up in, but somehow I became the target of six girls. It seems like I have no connection to Jennifer Lawrence or Barak Obama. But I do. We were all bullied. If you ask me, I’m in good company. But the fact that the three of us were all bullied suggests, to me, that bullying can happen anywhere, everywhere, to anyone. And that’s the basis of what I’m going to talk about.

Let’s begin with what we already know. We’ve learned through our school that bullying is the repeated use of aggression by 1 or more people against another person or group. We know that there are four basic forms of bullying: verbal, physical, psychological, and cyber, using technology. We also know the basics on why bullying happens. It may start with a kid who is shy, quiet, physically different, the “new kid,” or doesn’t have many friends, and the bully sees an opportunity for power over this kid. Lastly we know we could help improve a bullying situation by telling a teacher and intervening while it’s going on, also known as being an upstander. But let’s go past what we already know and dig a little deeper.

If you think about colors, let’s just say the color blue; there is light blue, dark blue, and just blue. Now think of these colors as sides of a topic; there’s a dark side, a bright side, and just the topic. Our knowledge of bullying just about covers the “just” side. This means we still know almost nothing of the other two sides. Today, I’m going to focus on the dark blue of bullying. Dark basically defines bullying, but what, specifically, is dark about bullying? Well, for one, there is the victim’s state of mind. Any person who has been bullied knows that going to school is the last thing you want to do. This leads to 160,000 people staying home from school every day; and that totals up to about 3 million by the end of the month. These victims are afraid of being bullied and just don’t have the internal strength to go to school and stand up for themselves. The second dark thing is that the victim feels alone. They could be standing in a jam-packed hallway and they would still feel utterly alone. They feel like no one cares about them, especially when no one steps up to help them in a bullying situation. Whether or not someone stands up, though, the victim gets weaker and weaker every time they are assaulted. And as crazy as it sounds, sometimes they give into their bullies, accept what they are saying, and then see themselves as worthless. This sometimes leads to giving up, thinking that their life isn’t worth living after what’s happened. And this is where violence comes in.

Violence and suicide as a result of bullying is oh-so-common in the media. In fact, it’s way too common. Think about all of the school shootings we’ve heard about. Many of the shooters in the circumstances have been bullied. Also, 4,400 suicides occur every year. And this doesn’t even include suicide attempts. Bullied teens are 2.5 times more likely to commit suicide than the average teenager. Bullying suicides happen because the victim feels like they can’t live with their experiences, like living on would be impossible, so they take their own lives.

But, despite all of these big numbers, some victims are resilient and can bounce back from being bullied. The down side is that there are many negative short- and long-term effects of bullying. Some examples of short-term effects are anger, depression, anxiety, greater possibility of getting sick, and lower grades. There are even more long-term effects, including, fewer opportunities for jobs, distrust, wanting revenge against their bullies, tendency to be a loner, and self-esteem problems. Also, triggers can take victims back to their experience. Some possible triggers are the names of their bullies, places where they were bullied, or the name of the school or class they were bullied in.

Let’s talk about why bulling happens. We have stereotypical images in our heads of tiny a kid being picked on by the huge popular kid. But sometimes the victim doesn’t show any one of these stereotypical characteristics. They may be of average size and looks, they could be outgoing and a great student. So, in these situations where the victim seems pretty normal, why does the bullying happen? Well, most likely, it has more to do with the bully. It could be because of the parents, teachers, or authoritative figures in the bully’s life. The parents could be abusive to their kid, or they don’t pay much attention to him or her. The parents could be mean to other adults and their kid sees this behavior as a role model. The parent may not know their kid is a bully, or they know and don’t care. And in the worse case scenario, maybe they want their kid to act that way.

But maybe the source comes from a higher level, the teachers, administrators, or authorities. In terms of schools, maybe there is no anti-bullying or bullying awareness program in the curriculum – it’s just not talked about. Also, it’s possible that teachers, whether or not bullying lessons are taught, don’t really discourage bullying behavior, or don’t care to get involved. Taking it up to police, violence in society can easily rub off on kids. There’s police brutality, domestic violence, war, and gangs. All of these things make the news and come up often in conversation. They are so common in society that some kids accept this violence as normal and use it on a peer.

So, how can we *really* make a difference? The first essential step is breaking the silence. What we already know fits nicely into this category; we need to let a trusted adult know and intervene when we see a situation. But we can’t stop there. We still have a role to play. Yes, we helped the situation by telling an adult, but it is still our responsibility to keep helping. We have to comfort the victim. Stay around the victim as much as possible. Usually, the bully doesn’t try any funny business when someone else is around. Our role continues in making the victim feel better. Bullying seriously lowers a victim’s self-esteem, so as the victim’s friend we need to make an effort to boost their self-esteem right back up. We can hang out with them and compliment them, in a genuine way. We need to surround the victim with friends and people who care about him or her.

I know that what I’m saying we need to do may sound kind of scary. It’s hard to stand up to a bully or go to an authority figure, it’s much easier to assume someone else will take care of it. But aren’t our friends worth the effort? I’m going to quote one of my favorite movies for this last point. “All you need is 10 seconds of insane courage” and you could change – maybe even save – the victim’s life. You can take them from the dark depths of their mind to being a superstar celebrity like Jennifer Lawrence or President Obama. You can use these 10 seconds to confront the bully or comfort the victim, either one has a hugely positive impact on the victim and situation.

We’ve all spent the year getting acquainted with the DMS Challenge. We know what bullying is, why it happens, and what to do. I’ve shared with you some of the darker sides of bullying. We *know*. The next step is to *act*. I’m not telling you that you have to do this. I’m just saying that if you take my advice, you could literally change someone’s life. And what if we all made a promise to step outside our comfort zone for 10 seconds and change the course of bullying? It’s not up to someone else to decide. It’s up to YOU.