

Ostracism hurts—but how? Shedding light on a silent, invisible abuse

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Humans need to belong. Yet they also commonly leave others out. Animals abandon the weakest to ensure the survival of the fittest. So do kindergartners and 'tweens, softball players and office workers.

Common though they are, rejection and exclusion hurt. Endured for a long time, ostracism leaves people feeling depressed and worthless, resigned to loneliness or desperate for attention—in extreme cases, suicidal or homicidal.

Yet ostracism “was essentially ignored by social scientists for 100 years,” says Purdue University psychologist Kipling D. Williams. His upcoming article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, begins to fill that void. The paper, co-authored by Steve A. Nida of The Citadel, offers important insights into what Williams calls a “non-behavior,” a slippery, invisible form of abuse.

Ostracism, says Williams, is experienced in three stages. In the first, “immediate,” stage, the rejected person—that means everybody—feels pain. Williams’ research has found that “it doesn’t matter who you’re being rejected by” or how slight the slight appears. People playing a computerized ball-toss game feel “the grief of exclusion” when a cartoon figure ignores them. In the lab, “African-Americans feel immediate pain when a Ku Klux Klan member leaves them out.” An alarm has gone off in the brain—the same part that registers physical pain: Belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful recognition are under attack.

Next comes the “coping” stage, when people figure out how to “improve their inclusionary status.” They pay attention to every social cue; they cooperate, conform, and obey. If belonging is a lost cause, they look to regain control. In extreme cases, “they may try to force people to pay attention.” For instance, a 2003 analysis of school shootings found that 13 of the 15 perpetrators had been ostracized.

But “coping requires psychological resources,” says Williams. Endure ostracism too long and “they’re depleted. You don’t have it in you to cope, so you give up. You become depressed, helpless, and despairing.” Even memories of long-ago rejection can bring up those feelings. This, psychologists have learned from interviews, is the third stage, “resignation.”

Williams is skeptical that ostracism can be eradicated. “It’s pretty ingrained,” he says. “If you tell kids it’s powerful, they’ll use it.” Although some people are seeking legal redress for ostracism as a form of workplace discrimination, “it’s hard to document something that isn’t happening”—not being asked to lunch, not being “in the loop”—and easy to deny. The perpetrator can even turn around and accuse the accuser of paranoia.

There’s more hope, he thinks, in developing tools for both victims and therapists to deal with the effects

of ostracism. Broader and deeper understanding can also give substance to this inaudible, invisible form of torment. “Some people will say, ‘I’d rather be bullied. Then at least I could show my bruises to the police.’” More scholarly attention to “the silent treatment,” says Williams, can “give people a voice.”