

Hurting Someone Else Can Hurt You Just As Much

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Experiencing ostracism — being deliberately ignored or excluded — hurts, but ostracizing someone else could hurt just as much, according to new research published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [*Association for Psychological Science*](#).

Humans are social animals and they typically avoid causing harm to others when they can. But past experiments — and real-life events — suggest that people are willing to inflict harm in order to comply with authorities.

Graduate student Nicole Legate, along with her advisor, Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester, and colleagues, hypothesized that complying with these kinds of directives might have psychological costs for the perpetrators. By causing harm to others, the perpetrators may be thwarting their own basic psychological needs to feel in control and to feel connected to others.

The researchers set up an experiment in which participants were asked to play a computer ball-throwing game, *Cyberball*. The participants were made to believe that the other two players in the game were real people playing from a different room, but they were actually controlled by a computer program that was designed to play a certain way.

In the first experiment, the *ostracizer* group of participants was instructed not to throw the ball to a certain player, while the *compliance* group was instructed to throw equally to both players. The *neutral* group was simply asked to throw the ball to whomever they wanted.

Participants in the ostracizer condition reported worse mood, which seemed to be the result of a diminished sense of independence and a lack of connectedness with others, confirming the researchers' initial hypothesis.

To compare the costs of ostracizing with those of being ostracized, the researchers conducted a second experiment that included an *ostracized* condition, in which participants rarely received the ball.

The experiment revealed that the costs of ostracizing other people were comparable to those of experiencing ostracism as a victim — both the ostracizer and ostracized groups reported experiencing more negative mood than the control group.

But the specific negative emotions experienced were different for the two groups. Ostracized participants felt more anger, while individuals who did the ostracizing experienced more shame, guilt, and distress. These negative feelings seemed to be the result of a lower sense of autonomy.

Even though the participants weren't interacting with the other players face to face, they still had strong emotional reactions, suggesting that people are wired to feel distress when doing harm to others, even

when they are anonymous and unseen. “This speaks positively about human nature!” notes Ryan.

The research has clear implications for contemporary issues of peer rejection and bullying, showing that there are costs that come with stigmatizing and rejecting others. And it may shed light on other types of social and physical harm, such as compliance in inflicting harm within military or police situations.

Ultimately, the research underscores humans’ fundamental nature as social creatures.

“Our results highlight that it goes against the grain of people’s psychological needs to exclude others,” says Ryan.

Ryan and his co-authors hope to expand on this research, exploring the ways in which various factors — such as stigma, prejudice, and justification — may change the dynamics of ostracism.

In addition to Legate and Ryan, co-authors on this research include Cody R. DeHaan from the University of Rochester and Netta Weinstein from the University of Essex.