

Everyday Aggression: We Hurt Those Closest to Us

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When we think of aggression, we might think of road rage or a bar fight, situations in which people are violent toward strangers. But research suggests that aggression is actually most often expressed toward the people we encounter in our day-to-day lives, such as romantic partners, friends, family, and coworkers.

In an [article](#) published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, psychological scientist Deborah South Richardson of Georgia Regents University presents an overview of scientific research exploring this “everyday” aggression.



As Richardson explains, only a behavior that is intended to harm someone qualifies as aggression. Aggression shouldn't be confused with assertiveness or ambition, which don't necessarily intend harm, or with hostility or anger, which involve expressions of emotion but aren't behaviors.

Importantly, aggression also involves another living being:

“Breaking a plate or throwing a chair to express general annoyance would not be aggression,” says Richardson. “Trying to hurt your mother by breaking her prized antique plate or throwing a chair *at* your friend in hopes of hurting him *would* be considered aggression.”

Using a questionnaire that she developed, Richardson and colleagues have been able to distinguish between different manifestations of aggression.

Direct aggression, for instance, entails “confronting another person with hurtful words or actions,” such as yelling or hitting. Non-direct aggression, on the other hand, includes both indirect behaviors that “[go] through another person or object,” such as damaging property or gossiping, as well as passive behaviors such as the silent treatment.

Data from the questionnaire have also provided some intriguing insights that seem to go against popular conceptions of aggression.

While aggression is generally associated with confrontational behavior, questionnaire participants actually report a preference for using passive rather than direct or even indirect aggression.

And, while gender stereotypes suggest that men are more aggressive than women, questionnaire data reveal that men are only more likely to use direct forms of aggression; men and women are equally likely to use indirect aggression.

The type of aggression expressed seems to depend, at least in part, on our social networks. In a study with male college students, young men who had closely connected social networks—meaning that the 10 people they most often interacted with were likely to know each other—were less likely to engage in direct aggression and more likely to use indirect aggression than were men whose circles of friends weren't as interconnected.

Research findings also suggest that romantic partners and friends bear the brunt of aggression overall, but that siblings are most likely to be on the receiving end of direct aggression. People tend to confront their siblings, as well as romantic partners, face-to-face; when it comes to friends, however, indirect aggression, such as malicious gossip, is more common.

One question Richardson hopes to answer with further research is what the consequences of everyday aggression are. Richardson suspects that everyday aggression may be caustic to both individuals and relationships; if this is the case, further research may help boost awareness of these consequences and provide us with tools that will help us hold our tongues—and our fists.

South Richardson, D. (2014). Everyday aggression takes many forms. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23 (3), 220-224. DOI: [10.1177/0963721414530143](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414530143)