

Victory and defeat: Are you a wolf or a sheep?

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Are all people stressed out by a defeat or does it hurt some more than others? It may depend on whether you're a power-hungry wolf or a sheep, according to University of Michigan psychology researchers.

In a study published in a recent issue of the science journal *Hormones and Behavior*, U-M's Michelle Wirth and co-authors, Katy Welsh and Oliver Schultheiss, looked at what happens to stress hormone levels when people are defeated in a laboratory contest.

Students competed against each other in pairs on several rounds of a speed-based contest task. Half of participants received feedback that made them believe they lost the contest decisively while the other half received feedback implying they won.

Wirth measured participants' levels of cortisol, a hormone that is released in the body in response to stress and has been implicated in depression and memory loss, in participants' saliva samples before and after the contest.

The U-M researchers also measured participants' non-conscious dominance drive, called the implicit power motive, at the beginning of the study.

Wirth and her colleagues found that cortisol did not go up in all losers. Only participants with a strong implicit power motive were really impacted by the defeat, as reflected in increasing stress hormone levels.

Losers without this non-conscious drive did not show a hormonal stress response. In other words, being defeated is stressful only for those who want to be powerful, but not for those who are not even interested in power in the first place.

Interestingly, winning the contest had the opposite effect. As expected, power-motivated individuals responded to a victory with a drop in their stress hormone levels. But individuals low in power motivation had an increase in cortisol after they won, suggesting that they were stressed by coming out on top.

"As our results show, one man's poison is another man's cake," said Schultheiss, associate professor of psychology. "The power-hungry 'wolves' among our participants were hit hardest by a defeat, whereas the 'sheep' couldn't care less about being beaten."

As it turns out, then, not only does being defeated hurt some more than other. Defeating others might also be a source of stress.

"The sheep were really uncomfortable with winning," Schultheiss said. "This runs counter to the idea that everybody likes coming out at the top of the heap. That's a really surprising finding for us."

Source: University of Michigan

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