

Handling rejection: New study sheds light on why it hurts

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Rejection is one of those universal experiences we can all relate to. Whether it's family or social, through business or a romantic rejection, that feeling of exclusion, or a lack of acceptance, is something we all dread.

Even though rejection in one form or another is a part of everyday life, the experience can be devastating and can have serious psychological consequences such as loneliness, reduced self-esteem, aggression and depression.

Now, a study done by Macquarie University psychology PhD candidate, Jonathan Gerber, into the behavioural effects of rejection sheds new light on precisely what it is about rejection that makes us feel so bad.

Gerber analysed 88 existing experimental rejection research studies. He found that while rejection moderately lowers mood and self-esteem, the loss of control felt by the person who has been rejected was found to be a major factor contributing further to their hurt and distress.

Rejection makes us realise that we are not as powerful and in control as we would like to be, Gerber says. As a result, one of the first things most people do when rejected is to look for opportunities to regain that lost sense of control.

"In a sense, rejection is another way of saying 'no', so when rejection is perceived, it is experienced as a barrier, an obstacle to be overcome,"

Gerber said.

"When the opportunity to regain control is present, people will tend to take this option, even if it means losing an opportunity to regain belonging."

He notes that attempts to regain control could also include a range of anti-social behaviours, such as increased aggression, harassment or even stalking - even though such behaviours would not serve to promote re-inclusion or lead to the restoration of a relationship, and would in fact work against it.

Given his findings, Gerber says that one way to help somebody who has been devastated by rejection is to highlight alternative ways for them to regain power that do not involve anti-social responses.

"We need to be mindful of avoiding putting rejected people into situations where the only way they can restore control is by being anti-social. Many of the anti-social reactions to rejection could be avoided if we could find ways of restoring control that also helped others."

Gerber says seeking ways to gain control over other areas of life can be a useful strategy. Likewise, when rejection occurs, it also helps when the person who is rejected can reframe the situation.

"Salespeople know that a certain amount of phone calls will end in rejection while others will follow through to sales, so it might be useful to realise that although rejection may have happened this time, it won't always happen," he says.

Provided by Macquarie University

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