

Self-inflicted pain eases guilt

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(Medical Xpress) -- Physical discomfort can ease feelings of guilt, according to a study conducted by The University of Queensland (UQ).

Dr Brock Bastian, from UQ's School of Psychology, found that self-inflicted [pain](#), which has been used for centuries as an extreme form of penance like wearing a hair shirt or self-flagellation, is actually effective in easing [feelings](#) of guilt.

A group of undergraduate students were recruited to test the theory that experiencing pain reduces feelings of guilt under the guise they were part of a study of mental and physical acuity.

Dr Bastian asked one group of students to briefly write about a past event that saw them ostracise someone – with the memory of being hurtful intended to make the students feel guilty – and asked another group to write about an everyday experience.

He then either asked the participants to plunge their hand into a bucket of ice water or to complete an equally challenging, but non-painful task.

All students then rated the pain they experienced and completed an emotional inventory that included feelings of guilt.

Dr Bastian said the idea was to see if immoral thinking caused the volunteers to subject themselves to more pain, and if this pain did indeed alleviate their feelings of guilt.

“Those who wrote about immoral behaviour exposed themselves to the ice for an average of 86.7 seconds whereas those who had written about everyday experiences exposed themselves for an average of only 64.4,” Dr Bastian said.

“Those who were primed to think of their own unethical nature not only kept their hands in the ice bath longer; they also rated the experience as more painful than the others.

“What's more, experiencing pain did reduce these volunteers' [feelings of guilt](#)—more than the comparable, but painless experience with warm water.

“Humans have been socialised over ages to think of pain in terms of justice. We equate it with punishment, and as the experimental results suggest, the experience has the psychological effect of rebalancing the scales of justice and therefore resolving guilt.”

Dr Bastian's study was recently published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Provided by University of Queensland

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