

'Self-distancing' can help people calm aggressive reactions, study finds

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A new study reveals a simple strategy that people can use to minimize how angry and aggressive they get when they are provoked by others.

When someone makes you angry, try to pretend you're viewing the scene at a distance - in other words, you are an observer rather than a participant in this stressful situation. Then, from that distanced perspective, try to understand your feelings.

Researchers call this strategy "self-distancing."

In one study, [college students](#) who believed a lab partner was berating them for not following directions responded less aggressively and showed less [anger](#) when they were told to take analyze their feelings from a self-distanced perspective.

"The secret is to not get immersed in your own anger and, instead, have a more detached view," said Dominik Mischkowski, lead author of the research and a [graduate student](#) in psychology at Ohio State University.

"You have to see yourself in this [stressful situation](#) as a fly on the wall would see it."

While other studies have examined the value of self-distancing for calming angry feelings, this is the first to show that it can work in the heat of the moment, when people are most likely to act aggressively, Mischkowski said.

The worst thing to do in an anger-inducing situation is what people normally do: try to focus on their hurt and angry feelings to understand them, said Brad Bushman, a co-author of the study and professor of communication and psychology at Ohio State.

"If you focus too much on how you're feeling, it usually backfires," Bushman said.

"It keeps the [aggressive thoughts](#) and feelings active in your mind, which makes it more likely that you'll act aggressively."

Mischkowski and Bushman conducted the study with Ethan Kross of the University of Michigan. Their findings appear online in the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#) and will be published in a future print edition.

There were two related studies. The first involved 94 college students who were told they were participating in a study about the effects of music on problem solving, creativity and emotions.

The students listened to an intense piece of classical music while attempting to solve 14 difficult anagrams (rearranging a group of letters to form a word such as "pandemonium"). They had only seven seconds to solve each anagram, record their answer and communicate it to the experimenter over an intercom.

But the plan of the study was to provoke the students into anger, which the experimenters did using a technique which has been used many times in similar studies.

The experimenter interrupted the study participants several times to ask them to speak louder into the intercom, finally saying "Look, this is the third time I have to say this! Can't you follow directions? Speak louder!"

After this part of the experiment, the participants were told they would be participating in a task examining the effects of music on creativity and feelings.

The students were told to go back to the anagram task and "see the scene in your mind's eye." They were put into three groups, each of which were asked to view the scene in different ways.

Some students were told to adopt a self-immersed perspective ("see the situation unfold through your eyes as if it were happening to you all over again") and then analyze their feelings surrounding the event. Others were told to use the self-distancing perspective ("move away from the situation to a point where you can now watch the event unfold from a distance...watch the situation unfold as if it were happening to the distant you all over again") and then analyze their feelings. The third [control group](#) was not told how to view the scene or analyze their feelings.

Each group was told to replay the scene in their minds for 45 seconds.

The researchers then tested the participants for aggressive thoughts and angry feelings.

Results showed that students who used the self-distancing perspective had fewer aggressive thoughts and felt less angry than both those who used the self-immersed approach and those in the control group.

"The self-distancing approach helped people regulate their angry feelings and also reduced their aggressive thoughts," Mischkowski said.

In a second study, the researchers went further and showed that self-distancing can actually make people less aggressive when they've been provoked.

In this study, 95 college students were told they were going to do an anagram task, similar to the one in the previous experiment. But in this case, they were told they were going to be working with an unseen student partner, rather than one of researchers (in reality, it actually was one of the researchers). In this case, the supposed partner was the one who delivered the scathing comments about following directions.

As in the first study, the participants were then randomly assigned to analyze their feelings surrounding the task from a self-immersed or a self-distanced perspective. Participants assigned to a third control group did not receive any instructions regarding how to view the scene or focus on their feelings.

Next, the participants were told they would be competing against the same partner who had provoked them earlier in a reaction-time task. The winner of the task would get the opportunity to blast the loser with noise through headphones - and the winner chose the intensity and length of the noise blast.

The findings showed that participants who used the self-distancing perspective to think about their partners' provocations showed lower levels of aggression than those in the other two groups. In other words, their noise blasts against their partner tended to be shorter and less intense.

"These participants were tested very shortly after they had been provoked by their partner," Mischkowski said.

"The fact that those who used self-distancing showed lower levels of aggression shows that this technique can work in the heat of the moment, when the anger is still fresh."

Mischkowski said it is also significant that those who used the self-

distancing approach showed less aggression than those in the control group, who were not told how to view the anger-inducing incident with their partner.

This suggests people may naturally use a self-immersing perspective when confronted with a provocation - a perspective that is not likely to reduce anger.

"Many people seem to believe that immersing themselves in their anger has a cathartic effect, but it doesn't. It backfires and makes people more aggressive," Bushman said.

Another technique people are sometimes told to use when angered is to distract themselves - think of something calming to take their mind off their anger.

Mischkowski said this may be effective in the short-term, but the anger will return when the distraction is not there.

"But self-distancing really works, even right after a provocation - it is a powerful intervention tool that anyone can use when they're angry."

Provided by Ohio State University

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