

Ranting on websites may just make you angrier

March 22 2013, by Barbara Bronson Gray, Healthday Reporter



Studies link Internet venting to short-term relaxation, long-term frustration.

(HealthDay)—It's so tempting. You read something on a website about a button-pushing issue that makes you mad and you've got to respond. Before you know it, you're verbally sparring with a stranger. But you may want to think twice before jumping into the fray.

While you might like getting your point of view off your chest, over the long term your rants may be making you less happy and more angry, suggest two new studies by a single research team.

The first study showed that while visitors to common "rant" websites reported feeling more relaxed immediately after posting a comment, overall they tend to experience more anger in general and can express their [frustration](#) in maladaptive ways.

The second study found that both reading other people's rants and writing your own are associated with negative mood shifts. The research was published online in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*.

"The Internet brings out impulsivity problems more than anything else," said lead author Ryan Martin, an associate professor of human development and psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. "It's too easy to respond right away when you are most angry."

Martin said while the study focused solely on rant websites that are devoted to back-and-forth virtual screaming, the research has implications for [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), and even news sites and blogs. He said the combination of being anonymous by using a screen name and having what he calls "social distance" reduce an individual's sense of restraint or caution about how to interact.

Websites that function as virtual punching bags reinforce harmful behavior, Martin said. "Most of these sites encourage venting as a way of dealing with anger," he said. "They think of venting as a healthy adaptive approach, and it's not."

For some people, venting online is caused by a sense of powerlessness and a feeling that they just can't make a difference, Martin said. A third study he did related to the published research looked at the content of rant sites and found that "people are angry at big groups of people: Democrats, Republicans, illegal immigrants," he said. "People want to feel they're doing something and think just expressing their feelings to the world will help."

Martin said venting has been described as putting a fire out with gasoline. But it's not actually the anger that's detrimental, according to the researchers. "There is nothing wrong with being angry and there are

lots of things to be angry about, and that is healthy," said Martin. But he added that a healthier and more effective approach is to get involved and do something to effect the kind of change you want, or focus on problem solving.

For the first study, the researchers posted an online survey on four popular rant sites, promising a chance at a \$50 gift card for participating. The survey assessed how angry the participants tended to be and how they expressed their anger, as well as consequences they've experienced due to their anger-related behavior.

Participants aged between 14 and 54, including 11 females and 21 males, visited the rant site one to three times a month on average—but some checked in much more often, even daily. An average visit lasted for between 11 and 15 minutes.

Participants also answered questions about why they visit the site and how they feel after ranting. The majority said they visit sites out of curiosity (about 78 percent). Of the 75 percent of participants who post rants, all said they usually feel calm and relaxed after ranting. Most people said they were looking for validation of how they were feeling from other people's responses to their rants.

The second study tapped students in introductory college psychology courses who earned course credit for participating. The average age was about 19. After completing a screening test designed to gauge their happiness, sadness, anger and fear levels, they viewed a home page of a rant site and were asked to read through the rants for five minutes.

Next, they spent five minutes writing their own anonymous rant, and retook the same screening test they took before going to the rant site.

Some experts expressed caution in interpreting the study results. Andrea

Weckerle, president of CiviliNation, a nonprofit organization working to reduce online hostility and adult cyberbullying, said that the small number of participants in both studies means the study should serve only as a talking point to stimulate discussion about the issue of Internet ranting. She added that using only college students in the second study limited how much their reactions could be applied to others.

But Weckerle said the problem is real. "Online hostility is a public health crisis. Lives are destroyed through aggression online," she noted.

While some people feel justified in ruthlessly expressing anger because they think the Internet is a separate world, Weckerle said they are wrong. "This is not a different environment. This is real life."

More information: Learn more about civility on the Internet from stopcyberbullying.org.

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