

Aggressive behavior brings emotional pain to the sadist

December 19 2018

People with sadistic personality traits tend to be aggressive, but only enjoy their aggressive acts if it harms their victims. According to a series of studies of over 2000 people, these actions ultimately leave sadists feeling worse than they felt before their aggressive act.

The research appears in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

"Sadistic tendencies don't just exist in serial killers, but in everyday people and are strongly-linked to greater aggressive [behavior](#)," says David Chester (Virginia Commonwealth University), lead author of the study.

In the [real world](#), sadists might be someone bullying others to feel better, or a group of sports fans looking for rival fans to fight for the "excitement" of it.

In a lab setting, the scientists gauged people's aggressive and sadistic tendencies by measuring participant's likelihood to seek vengeance or to harm an innocent person.

For some cases, the virtual event may have been having someone eat hot sauce as punishment or blasting an opponent with loud noises and reading about their suffering.

With each scenario, the researchers found those with a history of

aggression and sadistic behaviors, as measured by personality tests and questionnaires, showed more pleasure in causing harm to others, as expected, but they also saw that their overall mood went down following the event.

The authors were surprised to see the [negative impact](#) on mood.

It may be due to how aggression affects the brain, making people perceive something as pleasurable, when it actually creates the opposite effect, suggests Chester.

Better understanding the dynamic emotions that drive sadistic aggression may help [people](#) create interventions as well.

How aggression and sadistic behaviors tie into the cycle of violence

If they break the link between pleasure and inflicting pain, by changing how the sadist perceives the harm they inflict, or by helping the sadist understand how it will harm them, Chester suspects we may be able to "short-circuit" the aggression cycle.

The complex relations between the positive feelings before or during aggression in sadists, coupled with the negative mood following a sadistic behavior, suggests there are several ways to understand, and hopefully address, violence.

"Aggression is often thought of as a product of negative feelings such as anger, frustration, and pain — yet this is not the whole story," says Chester. Their research on the link between [aggression](#) and sadism suggest that [positive feelings](#) are also an important cause of human violence.

"Going forward, psychologists should not neglect this side of the aggressive coin," says Chester.

More information: David S. Chester, C. Nathan DeWall, and Brian Enjaian. Sadism and Aggressive Behavior: Inflicting Pain to Feel Pleasure. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Online before print December 19, 2018. [DOI: 10.1177/0146167218816327](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218816327)

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Aggressive behavior brings emotional pain to the sadist (2018, December 19) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-12-aggressive-behavior-emotional-pain-sadist.html>

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