

Cognitive flexibility training manages responses to social conflict

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Scientists at the Walter Reed Army Institute for Research and Army Research Laboratory have developed a computer-based training to reduce anger, reactive aggression and hostile attribution bias—the

tendency to attribute hostile intent to the actions of others—in ambiguous social conflict situations.

Anger and [aggression](#) are common reactions to interpersonal provocations. However, not all provocations lead to these reactions. Past scientific research suggests that the extent to which the victim believes the provocateur acted with malice is key to predicting whether the victim will respond with [anger](#) and aggression. The tendency to assume malice in the actions of others is called hostile attribution [bias](#).

Hostile attribution bias and unwarranted anger can jeopardize social bonds, team culture and team performance. It is also linked to post-[traumatic stress disorder](#), depression and other behavioral health concerns.

The novel training, named Hostile Bias Modification Training, exposes trainees to three types of word fragments: ambiguous, aggressive and non-aggressive. Ambiguous fragments could form aggressive or non-aggressive words (KI_ _ could become KILL or KIND), aggressive fragments can only form aggressive words (W_ _PON for WEAPON) and non-aggressive fragments can only form non-aggressive words (FR_ _END for FRIEND).

Participants are instructed to only form non-aggressive words and not respond if they cannot think of a non-aggressive word. Subsequently, study participants reacted to vignettes where they were wronged: in some vignettes the intent of the wrongdoer was clearly hostile while in others it was ambiguous. A second study linked these findings to real-world situations by analyzing participants' driving and online social media behavior.

Publishing their findings in the journal *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, the researchers suggest that HBMt results in significantly lower rates of

anger, aggression and hostile attribution bias in response to socially frustrating situations compared to control groups in both laboratory and real-world situations. Notably, HBMT did not alter judgements where the intent of the wrongdoer was clearly hostile.

"Though more research is needed, we believe that HBMT could be effective as both a standalone tool for use at home, in field settings, or in concert with other therapeutic options to help mitigate unwarranted anger and aggression," said Capt. Jeffrey Osgood, a research psychologist at WRAIR and lead author of the study. "We are excited about HBMT's potential to both prevent and treat behavioral health concerns."

While researchers followed participants up to 96 hours after HBMT, further research is needed to determine the maximum durability of the training as well as to study it in clinical populations, identify the optimal dosing strategy and test its use alongside other treatments.

More information: Jeffrey M. Osgood et al, Online Intervention Reduces Hostile Attribution Bias, Anger, Aggressive Driving, and Cyber-Aggression, Results of Two Randomized Trials, *Cognitive Therapy and Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1007/s10608-020-10147-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-020-10147-8)

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