

# Controlled cruelty: New study finds aggression can arise from successful self-control

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A new study by a Virginia Commonwealth University researcher has found that aggression is not always the product of poor self-control but, instead, often can be the product of successful self-control in order to inflict greater retribution.

The new paper, "Aggression As Successful Self-Control," by corresponding author David Chester, Ph.D., an associate professor of social psychology in the Department of Psychology at VCU's College of Humanities and Sciences, was published by the journal *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* and uses meta-analysis to summarize evidence from dozens of existing studies in psychology and neurology.

"Typically, people explain violence as the product of poor [self-control](#)," Chester said. "In the heat of the moment, we often fail to inhibit our worst, most [aggressive impulses](#). But that is only one side of the story."

Indeed, Chester's study found that the most aggressive people do not have personalities characterized by poor self-discipline and that training programs that boost self-control have not proved effective in reducing violent tendencies. Instead, the study found ample evidence that aggression can arise from successful self-control.

"Vengeful people tend to exhibit greater premeditation of their behavior and self-control, enabling them to delay the gratification of sweet revenge and bide their time to inflict maximum retribution upon those who they believe have wronged them," Chester said. "Even psychopathic people, who comprise the majority of people who commit violent offenses, often exhibit robust development of inhibitory self-control over their [teenage years](#)."

Aggressive behavior is reliably linked to increased—not just decreased—activity in the brain's prefrontal cortex, a biological substrate of self-control, Chester found. The findings make it clear that the

argument that aggression is primarily the product of poor self-control is weaker than previously thought.

"This paper pushes back against a decades-long dominant narrative in aggression research, which is that violence starts when self-control stops," Chester said. "Instead, it argues for a more balanced, nuanced view in which self-control can both constrain and facilitate aggression, depending on the person and the situation."

The findings also argue for more caution in the implementation of treatments, therapies and interventions that seek to reduce violence by improving self-control, Chester said.

"Many interventions seek to teach people to inhibit their impulses, but this new approach to aggression suggests that although this may reduce aggression for some people, it is also likely to increase aggression for others," he said. "Indeed, we may be teaching some people how best to implement their aggressive tendencies."

The findings surprised Chester, a psychologist whose team frequently studies the causes of human aggression.

"Over the years, much of our research was guided by the field's assumption that aggression is an impulsive behavior characterized by poor self-control," he said. "But as we started to investigate the [psychological characteristics](#) of vengeful and psychopathic people, we quickly realized that such aggressive individuals do not just have self-regulatory deficits; they have many psychological adaptations and skills that enable them to hurt others by using self-control."

Chester and his team plan to continue exploring questions around aggression and self-control based on the study's findings.

"Our research going forward is now guided by this new paradigm shift in thinking: that [aggression](#) is often the product of sophisticated and complex mental processes and not just uninhibited impulses," Chester said.

**More information:** David S. Chester, Aggression as successful self-control, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/spc3.12832](#)

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