

Professor: Pain of ostracism can be deep, long-lasting

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Kipling D. Williams, a Purdue professor of psychological sciences, studies how ostracism hurts individuals as much or even more than a physical injury. His research is reported in the current issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Sciences*. Credit: Purdue University photo/Mark Simons

Ostracism or exclusion may not leave external scars, but it can cause pain that often is deeper and lasts longer than a physical injury, according to a Purdue University expert.

"Being excluded or ostracized is an invisible form of bullying that doesn't leave bruises, and therefore we often underestimate its impact," said Kipling D. Williams, a professor of [psychological sciences](#). "Being excluded by high school friends, office colleagues, or even spouses or family members can be excruciating. And because [ostracism](#) is experienced in three stages, the life of those painful feelings can be extended for the long term. People and clinicians need to be aware of this so they can avoid depression or other [negative experiences](#)."

When a person is ostracized, the brain's dorsal [anterior cingulate cortex](#), which registers physical pain, also feels this social injury, Williams said. The process of ostracism includes three stages: the initial acts of being ignored or excluded, coping and resignation.

Williams' research is reported in the current issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Sciences*. The article was co-authored by Steve A. Nida, associate provost and dean of The Citadel Graduate College and a professor of psychology.

"Being excluded is painful because it threatens fundamental human needs, such as belonging and self-esteem," Williams said. "Again and again research has found that strong, harmful reactions are possible even when ostracized by a stranger or for a short amount of time."

More than 5,000 people have participated in studies using a computer game designed by Williams to show how just two or three minutes of ostracism can produce lingering [negative feelings](#).

"How can it be that such a brief experience, even when being ignored and excluded by strangers with whom the individual will never have any face-to-face interaction, can have such a powerful effect?" he said. "The effect is consistent even though individuals' personalities vary."

People also vary in how they cope, which is the second stage of ostracism. Coping can mean the person tries to harder be included. For example, some of those who are ostracized may be more likely to engage in behaviors that increase their future inclusion by mimicking, complying, obeying orders, cooperating or expressing attraction.

"They will go to great lengths to enhance their sense of belonging and self-esteem," Williams said.

If they feel there is little hope for re-inclusion or that they have little control over their lives, they may resort to provocative behavior and even aggression.

"At some point, they stop worrying about being liked, and they just want to be noticed," Williams said.

However, if a person has been ostracized for a long time, they may not have the ability to continue coping as the pain lingers. Some people may give up, Williams said.

"The third stage is called resignation. This is when people who have been ostracized are less helpful and more aggressive to others in general," he said. "It also increases anger and sadness, and long-term ostracism can result in alienation, depression, helplessness and feelings of unworthiness."

Williams is trying to better understand how ostracized individuals may be attracted to extreme groups and what might be the reactions of ostracized groups.

"These groups provide members with a sense of belonging, self-worth and control, but they can fuel narrowness, radicalism and intolerance, and perhaps a propensity toward hostility and violence toward others," he said. "When a person feels ostracized they feel out of control, and aggressive behavior is one way to restore that control. When these individuals come together in a group there can be negative consequences."

More information: ABSTRACT

Ostracism: Consequences and Coping, by Kipling D. Williams and Steve A. Nida, *Current Directions in Psychological Sciences*

Ostracism means being ignored and excluded by one or more others. Despite the absence of verbal derogation and physical assault, ostracism is painful: It threatens psychological needs (belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence); and it unleashes a variety of psychological, affective, cognitive and behavioral responses. Here we review the empirical literature on ostracism within the framework of the temporal need-threat model.

Provided by Purdue University

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