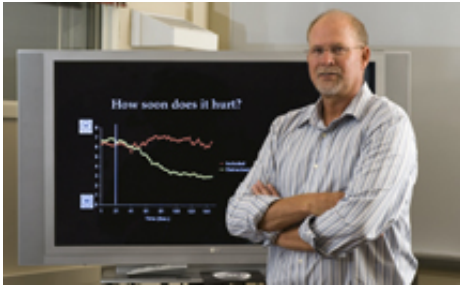


Those briefly ostracized recover more quickly if they previously were given focused attention training, study finds

4 October 2013, by Amy Patterson Neubert



Kipling D. Williams.

(Medical Xpress)—When people are briefly ostracized, they feel distress that may linger for some time, however, they recover more quickly from the experience if they are better prepared mentally to focus on something else, shows a new study from Purdue University and the University of Lille, France.

"When confronted with short episodes of [ostracism](#), the best way to cope is to not ruminate on the experience but to focus on the present rather than relive the past," said Kipling D. Williams, Purdue professor of psychological sciences, who has studied ostracism for 20 years. "We know ostracism is painful, even in illogical circumstances, and in some cases is an invisible form of bullying. Some people have better coping skills, but there can be severe consequences for others who feel excluded, rejected or are given the silent treatment."

Research shows that ostracism is harmful and resonates in the same area of the brain as physical pain, so scientists are focusing on possible coping mechanisms. In this study, which is published online in the journal *Consciousness and Cognition*, the researchers provided one group of adults with 12 minutes of instruction on a breathing technique

that helps people direct their focus. During this time, the control group was told to think about what they would normally think about. Then all 48 subjects played an online game in which they were included or ostracized. The subjects were evaluated immediately after the game to see if they were bothered by the experience, and then again about 5 minutes later.

"Those who were recently trained to focus their attention on the here and now apparently used it afterwards without the researchers instructing them to," said Mikaël Molet, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Lille who led the study. "And very few of them reported the ostracism experience still bothered them. At the same time, those who were not instructed on this focusing technique were still bothered by the exclusion.

"The breathing technique didn't make the pain any easier for anyone who was excluded, but it does suggest that something like the focusing techniques of positive psychology, known as [mindfulness training](#), can speed the coping and recovering from an ostracism experience."

Both Molet and Williams will continue evaluating possible coping strategies. This is a small laboratory study that needs additional follow up to measure how long the effects last and to review the technique's effectiveness outside of a laboratory, the researchers said. They also noted the focused breathing technique used here was an abbreviated training session of what are usually multiple long-term instruction sessions.

"That's what is so surprising here, just 12 minutes of training made a difference, and they weren't told to use it or reminded of it again. Just a brief training was enough to help them," Williams said. "We hope to build on this work and better understand how to

help people. The findings were consistent and significant for this short-term experience, but could this be like grieving? Does the focus distract or postpone the [pain](#)? That's another question we need to answer."

More information: A focused attention intervention for coping with ostracism, Mikaël Molet, Benjamin Macquet, Olivier Lefebvre, Kipling D. Williams, *Consciousness and Cognition*, 2013.

ABSTRACT

Ostracism - being excluded and ignored - thwarts satisfaction of four fundamental needs: belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence. The current study investigated whether training participants to focus on their attention on the here-and-now (i.e., focused attention) reduces distress from an ostracism experience. Participants were first trained in either focused or unfocused attention, and then played Cyberball, an online ball-tossing game for which half the participants were included or ostracized. Participants reported their levels of need satisfaction during the game, and after a short delay. Whereas both training groups experienced the same degree of need-threat in the immediate measure, participants who were trained in focused attention showed more recovery for the delayed measure. We reason that focused attention would not reduce the distress during the ostracism experience, but it aided in recovery by preventing participants from reliving the ostracism experience after it concludes.

Provided by Purdue University

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