

Venting can make your anger worse

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SALT LAKE CITY — Following a study to determine if venting helps diffuse anger, Brad Bushman, one of today's top researchers on anger and aggressive responding, found that "venting to reduce anger is like using gasoline to put out a fire —it only feeds the flame."

In Bushman's introduction to the study, he explains the catharsis theory — the belief that "venting one's anger will produce a positive improvement in one's psychological state." Sigmund Freud believed that holding in anger would result in psychological problems, such as hysteria. Breuer and Freud believed that it was much better to vent anger than to bottle it up.

Ever since these beliefs were proposed, it has been a widespread belief that venting is the best way to handle anger. Bushman decided to test this theory by putting together a study using 600 Iowa University students — 300 men and 300 women.

To test if venting was the best way to handle anger, the researchers had to make the students angry. The students were riled up by writing essays about abortion — either pro-life or pro-choice — and their essays were then given terrible reviews from partners who were actually made up persons.

The students were then asked to rate how much they wanted to do certain activities such as punching a punching bag. Based on these ratings, the students were split into three groups.

One group used the punching bag as a way to vent their anger and after viewing a random picture of the 'partner' and were told to imagine the punching bag being their partners face as they punched. They could punch the bag as long and as hard as they wanted.

The second group was told to punch the punching bag with the intent of getting physically active, and the third group was the control group, who were told to wait for two minutes while they fixed their non-existent partner's computer.

The first two groups were monitored on how long they punched, how hard they punched, and then all three groups were evaluated on their moods afterwards.

The results illustrated that the first group was the most angry, and the act of venting their anger did not lead to a positive mood. The second group was less angry, but not less aggressive. Bushman concluded in his report about the second group that "performing an aggressive activity such as hitting a punching bag can increase aggression even if people are distracted while performing the activity." The third group showed the least amount of anger and aggression.

So, if venting anger does not help diffuse it, what does? An article written by psychologist Sherrie Bourg Carter on the Psychology Today website explains that the things that help most

with anger are removing yourself from the situation, delaying your reaction, distracting yourself (but as Bushman's study found, you can only distract yourself with non-aggressive activities), find an incompatible response, and recognize that anger is as much a symptom as it is an emotion.