



## Aggression

Intentional behavior aimed at causing either physical or psychological pain.

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## Distinctions

- Hostile aggression = act of aggression stemming from a feeling of anger and aimed at inflicting pain or injury
- Instrumental aggression = intention to hurt someone as a means to some goal other than causing pain



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## Theories of Aggression: Instinctive

- Hydraulic theory: unless aggression is "vented" it will build up.
- Per Freud, society helps us to sublimate this destructive force into useful behavior.
- Some evolutionary advantage to aggression, but all organisms have also evolved inhibitory mechanisms making aggression an optional survival strategy.

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### Theories of Aggression: Instinctive

- Aggression among cultures varies greatly, and within any given culture, aggressive tendencies (for better or worse) can be modified by changing social conditions.
- Even within the US, cultural attitudes about aggression vary, with aggression for the sake of honor and of protecting property more tolerated in the South and West.

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### Theories of Aggression: Instinctive

- Among some species of animals, the most aggressive male becomes responsible for a large proportion of the reproduction and is dominant in the hierarchy.
- However, altruistic behavior can also have survival value and can also be observed in animals.

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### Theories of Aggression: Catharsis

- A cultural myth.
- "Blowing off steam," "Punching or screaming into a pillow," or "venting" your anger does not alleviate aggressive tendencies and in fact increases the likelihood and intensity of aggressiveness.
- Cognitive dissonance can explain it.

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### Theories of Aggression: Catharsis

- When we aggress to retaliate, we often do more harm to the person who hurt us than they had done to us.
- Retaliation overkill maximizes dissonance.
- The greater the discrepancy between the original hurt and your retaliation, the greater the dissonance.
- The greater the dissonance, the more you need to derogate him to alleviate it.

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### Theories of Aggression: Catharsis

- The discrepancy and dissonance will be greatest if the person was actually innocent (e.g. didn't hurt you on purpose).
- Thus your need to derogate will be greatest when the person is innocent.
- Research has shown that retaliation can reduce the need for further aggression if the retaliation can be controlled so that it restores equity and doesn't progress to overkill.

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### Causes of Aggression: Neurological & Chemical

- Stimulating the amygdala can result in aggression.
- Testosterone increases aggressiveness.
- Behaving aggressively increases the release of testosterone.
- Males more physically aggressive than females.
- Females more prone to social aggression / relational aggression—exclusion, sabotaging relationships, rumors, gossip.

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### Causes of Aggression: Neurological & Chemical

- When people ingest enough alcohol to make them drunk, they tend to respond more violently to provocation.
- Drinking reduces social inhibitions.
- Disrupts the way we process social information, causing us to miss subtleties (e.g. may misinterpret accidental slights as aggression and then retaliate).



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### Causes of Aggression: Neurological & Chemical

- Pain, discomfort (heat, humidity, pollution, offensive odors) lower the threshold for aggression.
- If an organism experiences pain and can't escape, it will attack.
- Riots, and violent crimes, but not other crimes, more likely on hot days.
- Subjects in a hot room more likely to report feelings of aggression, drivers without air conditioning more likely to honk their horns in traffic jams.

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### Causes of Aggression: Frustration

- Major instigator of aggression is frustration.
- Barker, Dembo & Lewin (1941). Showed kids desirable toys, but didn't let them play with them.
- When they were allowed to play, they were destructive to the toys.

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### Causes of Aggression: Frustration

- Frustration is most pronounced when the goal is close, when expectations are high, and the goal is blocked unjustifiably.
- Not the result of deprivation, but relative frustration.



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### Causes of Aggression: Rejection, Exclusion & Taunting

- Rejection and humiliation were underlying the Columbine shootings as well as other school rampages.
- When subjects were subjected to rejection in the course of an experiment, they expressed far more hostility against those who rejected them, as well as against neutral individuals.

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### Causes of Aggression: Social Learning

- Our ability to attribute intention to actions mediates aggressive responses.
- We are less likely to retaliate against someone who has provoked our anger if we have a good excuse for their behavior before it occurs, rather than after the fact.
- Frustration, plus exposure to certain provocative stimuli (e.g. aggressive movie, presence of an aggressive stimulus) will strengthen the tendency for aggression.

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**Causes of Aggression:  
Social Learning**

- The tendency for people to take responsibility for their actions usually inhibits aggression.
- Zimbardo (1969). Deindividuation (people being anonymous and unidentifiable) tend to act more aggressively.
- Deindividuation results in lessened self-awareness, reduced concern over social evaluation, and weakened restraints against prohibited behaviors.

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**Causes of Aggression:  
Violence and Mass Media**

- High correlation between amount of violent TV watched and subsequent aggression.
- Impact accumulates over time—strength of the correlation increases with age.
- When experimental situation children were exposed to a violent TV episode, then allowed to play in another room in a group, they showed more aggression against their peers.

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**Causes of Aggression:  
Violence and Mass Media**

- Impact of violent TV is greatest for kids who are already prone to violence.
- Kids who don't have aggressive tendencies to begin with will not necessarily act aggressively at least, not on the basis of seeing one aggressive film.
- Average 12-year old has witnessed 100,000 acts of violence on TV.

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**Causes of Aggression:  
Violence and Mass Media**

- Impact of violent TV not limited to kids.
- Jeffery, Cohen, Smailes, Stephani & Brook (2002). 700 families over 17 years.
- Significant correlation between amount of time spent watching television during adolescence and early adulthood and the likelihood of acts of violence.

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**Causes of Aggression:  
Violence and Mass Media**

- Phillips (1986). Homicide rates in US increased during the week following a heavyweight boxing match, especially if it was highly publicized.
- Race of prizefight loser related to the race of murder victim.

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**Causes of Aggression:  
Numbing Effect**

- Repeated exposure to violence causes us to be desensitized to further acts of violence.
- It even has a physiological effect—those who watch a lot of TV show less physiological arousal to violence.

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### Pornography & Violence Against Women

- Explicit sexual material *in itself* does not contribute to sexual crimes, violence against women or other antisocial acts.
- Exposure to *violent* pornography promotes greater acceptance of sexual violence toward women, violent intent to female subjects experimentally, and more violent sexual fantasies.

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### Pornography & Violence Against Women

- There are still some faulty myths about rape:
- That women don't really mean "no" when they say it.
- That some women provoke rape or enjoy it.
- Even some women express beliefs that *other* women may actually enjoy being overpowered.

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### Pornography & Violence Against Women

- Greater desensitizing effects of violence than sex, yet sex gets more restrictive ratings with movies.
- There is also the myth that sex and violence sell.
- Research shows that viewers have better recall of products shown during the viewing of a neutral program than recall of products viewed during violent or sexually explicit program.
- Violence and sex interferes with, or impairs the memory of viewers.

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### Reducing Aggression

- Reason and logical arguments alone are not effective in reducing aggression.
- Punishing children for aggressive acts promotes more frustration, violence and aggression in the children, especially outside of the home away from the punishing parent.
- Harsh prison sentences similarly not effective.

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### Reducing Aggression

- Prisoners who served their complete term were twice as likely to return to prison than those released early.
- Severe punishment may result in compliance, but rarely internalization.
- Cognitive dissonance theory states that mild punishment would be most effective.

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### Reducing Aggression

- Viewing aggressive models getting punished does not deter violence in the viewers.
- It can make the offender appear more attractive and cause the viewer to identify with him.
- Watching an aggressive person get punished will result in less aggression than watching an aggressive person get rewarded.
- But, the level aggression is not lower than children who were never exposed to an aggressive model in the first place.

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### Reducing Aggression

- Ignoring children's aggressive behavior and being very attentive when they are engaging in behaviors incompatible with aggression is very effective.
- Rewarding constructive group behavior reduces aggression, but given the models provided by the media, it is unlikely children will choose constructive behavior on their own.
- Many don't realize there are alternatives available.

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### Reducing Aggression

- The presence of people in similar frustrating situations who are restrained and unaggressive curbs aggression.
- The expression of aggression, or lack of aggression, is susceptible to the effects of conformity.
- In ambiguous situations, you will look to other people to determine what is appropriate.

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### Reducing Aggression

- Most people cannot inflict pain on another unless they dehumanize them.
- Teaching young children to take the perspective of others develops empathy and reduces aggression.
- Experimentally, something as simple as disclosing something personal about yourself, sets the stage for empathy and reduces aggression.

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