

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Revenge: Will You Feel Better?

Revenge can be a strong urge, but you may not feel better if you act on it.

Source: Karyn Hall, *Psychology Today*, September 15, 2013

Understanding how emotions and thoughts influence behavior is important for people who have intense emotions and are often ruled by them. Knowledge about emotions and the thoughts that strengthen or soften those emotions can help people develop ways to better manage their actions.

One urge that people experience but rarely discuss is revenge. Webster's online dictionary defines revenge as to avenge (as oneself) *usually by retaliating in kind or degree or to inflict injury in return for something*, such as to revenge an insult.

The struggle with revenge is centuries old. Shakespeare said, "If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?" Shakespeare clearly thought revenge was as normal and predictable as the sun rising.

Maybe, but what about the idea that revenge is self-destructive? Confucius said, "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." Gandhi seemed to agree with him when he said, "An eye for eye only ends up making the whole world blind."

Revenge seems to be one of the deepest instincts we have. Who hasn't said, "I hope he gets his," or wished that Karma would strike sooner rather than later? Dirty Harry's "Go ahead, make my day" resonates across generations. Out of control revenge, attack and counterattack, can be blinding and destroy the lives of all involved. But our instincts and emotions usually serve a purpose.

Researchers and theorists believe that revenge is a form of establishing justice and that the threat of revenge may serve as a form of protection, a kind of enforcement of social cooperation. Imagine that your neighbor hosts large, overnight parties and his guests continually park so that you can't get out of your driveway. If you believe that your neighbor is a rational person who won't retaliate, you may be tempted to key the guests' cars or smear them with eggs. If you think your neighbor would "come after you," then you are less likely to act on your anger.

Maybe the purpose of revenge is in preventing certain hostile actions or the threat of revenge insures people do not hurt you in the future. But sometimes people act revengeful when no good can come of their actions, other than to inflict suffering on others. Those actions can go to unfathomable extremes. From lovers running over a beloved iPhone or destroying what their ex most values, to businessmen damaging the careers of those who have rejected them, to students opening fire in school hallways, revenge can be an act of anger, hurt and power.

People who have been hurt or betrayed seem to believe without any doubt that if the other party suffers, then they will feel better--their emotional pain will lessen. Is this true?

Revenge Makes You Feel Worse

To test whether revenge makes people feel better, Kevin Carlsmith and his colleagues set up a group investment game with college students where if everyone cooperated, everyone would benefit equally. However, if someone refused to invest his or her money, that person would benefit at the group's expense.

A secret experimenter (called a free rider) in each group convinced the group members to invest equally. But when it came time to put up the money, the free riders didn't go along with the agreed-upon plan. As a result, the free riders earned an average of \$5.59, while the other players earned around \$2.51.

Here's the revenge part. Carlsmith offered some groups a way to get back at the free rider: They could spend some of their own earnings to financially punish the group's defector. Everyone who was given the chance for revenge took it. And they predicted that they would feel much better after they got their revenge.

The results showed that the students who got revenge reported feeling worse than those who didn't, *but* believed they would have felt even worse if they hadn't gotten back at the free riders. The students who didn't get the opportunity for revenge said they thought they would feel better if they'd had that opportunity, even though the survey results identified them as the happier group. Both groups thought revenge would be sweet, but their own reported feelings showed that revenge made them less happy.

How to explain this? Carlsmith suggests that the reason revenge increases anger rather than decreasing it is because of ruminations. When people don't get revenge, they tend to trivialize the event by telling themselves that because they didn't act on their vengeful feelings, it wasn't a big deal. Then it's easier to forget it and move on. But when people do get revenge, they can no longer trivialize the situation. Instead, they go over and over it and feel worse.

Is Revenge Hardwired?

Dan Ariely discusses revenge experiments in which the participants' brains were scanned by positron emission tomography (PET) while they were making decisions about revenge. The results showed increased activity in the reward center of the brain (striatum). The greater the activation, the more the participants punished the offenders. Ariely suggests that this punishing betrayal or perceived betrayal has a biological basis and feels pleasurable. At least the decision to get revenge does.

Reestablishing Trust

Ariely states that revenge and trust are opposite sides of the same coin. Perhaps the idea that people believe revenge restores justice is really about reestablishing trust.

Ariely's experiments on revenge showed that the tendency to seek revenge did not depend on whether the actual person responsible for the offense suffered, but only that *someone* associated with the offense pay. Time passing helped lower the urge for revenge for small annoyances. In addition, apologies completely counteracted the effect of small annoyances. When an apology was given, the participants did not extract revenge. Please note this was a one-time annoyance, not a series of repeated offenses.

What to Do When You Have Thoughts of Revenge

As with all internal experiences, being mindful of what you are experiencing is the first step. Thoughts of revenge apparently feel good and may be a basic human instinct, perhaps to help us survive. Accept your urges and thoughts of revenge as a basic human response related to trust.

Trust is important in any relationship and critical for cooperative societies. When you are thinking about revenge, it usually means you believe trust has been broken. Remember, while the anticipation of revenge may feel pleasurable, the actual carrying out of revenge brings little satisfaction and may create more problems and suffering. Acts of revenge do not repair trust or re-establish a sense of justice for both parties.

Wait until you are calm emotionally and can think rationally before making any decisions. This is the cold part of "revenge is a dish best served cold." If you act impulsively on such urges you are likely to create more suffering for yourself and others and regret your actions.

Consider whether the loss of trust is justified. Do you have all the facts? If not, get clarity about what truly happened before taking any action or making any decisions. If someone has acted in ways that truly are untrustworthy and hurtful, then task suggested by your thoughts and urges is to find ways to repair the trust or to move forward in a different direction. Maybe there has been a misunderstanding, a miscommunication, or maybe there is a problem that could be solved.

Would a dialogue with the offending person to explain your position be helpful for you, even if nothing changed? Would the offending person be willing to listen? Sometimes expressing your views and feelings is helpful. An apology could be quite healing and having a dialogue could give the offending person the opportunity to do that.

Learn from the experience. Were there signs of problems that you ignored? Were you careful about who you trusted? What positive changes can you make based on what you have learned? How do you see yourself as a result of this experience? Did you make decisions that show self-respect and reflect your values, regardless of how the other person behaved?

Focus on what is in your control and take the next right step. Sometimes it may be that standing up for yourself is the right step, but doing so in a positive way rather than for revenge.

Practice radical acceptance that some people will break your trust. That is a statement about them, not about you. Your response is about you. When you are emotionally sensitive, you may experience many situations in which you feel hurt by others and those urges for revenge can be managed.

Possible Response Questions:

- What are your thoughts regarding revenge? Is it ever justified? Explain.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.