

Venting Anger: A Good Habit to Break

by Tammy Lenski

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Go ahead, said the encounter group facilitator, hit each other! Let it out! Let the other know how angry you are and stop holding it in! Think about your anger and let it out now!



It looked to my seven-year-old eyes like a pillow fight gone very wrong. It was the first time I recall encountering the idea that venting anger is a good thing and I've heard it countless times since. Few workshops and courses go by that someone doesn't mention the value of venting.



I've also had experienced mediators and conflict coaches in my advanced trainings and courses tell me they invite or teach their clients to "blow off steam" so they can calm down and do better work.

There's a problem with this thinking: The value of venting is a myth. The theory on which the idea of venting anger is based has been repeatedly disproven since the 1950s.

While it may feel cathartic, venting anger doesn't purge aggression from your system or improve psychological state. In fact, it's more likely to increase anger and aggressiveness. Daniel Goleman, author of [Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ](#), cautions that venting feels satisfying "because of the seductive nature of anger."

Why venting anger is a bad idea

I tell my clients and grad students these top reasons to break the venting habit:

A 2001 study by University of Michigan psychology professor and aggression researcher Dr. Brad Bushman concluded that "venting to reduce anger is like using gasoline to put out a fire—it only feeds the flame. By fueling aggressive thoughts and feelings, venting also increases aggressive responding. Venting did not lead to a more positive mood either."

Outbursts of rage pump up the brain's state of arousal, increasing what Goleman calls emotional flooding.

Rumination, the act of focusing on your angry feelings, has been shown to increase angry feelings and increase displaced aggression (lashing out at someone unrelated to the event that provoked the anger).

Activities such as punching a pillow or pounding nails – essentially serving as substitute targets – don't reduce arousal and have been shown to increase hostility.

Bushman calls this type of venting the “worst possible advice to give people.”

Intense physical activity after provocation is more likely increase anger than reduce it.

If the act of venting becomes repeated, it risks becoming a habit – a bad habit. It is, after all, “practicing how to behave aggressively,” says Bushman.

What to do instead of venting anger

There are three excellent alternatives to the venting habit. I recommend you practice the first two in low-stakes situations to build your “muscle memory” (capacity) to pull them off in the higher stakes moments.

If you're a mediator looking for tips to help your clients in escalated situations, you'll probably find the second and third approaches most useful. You can help with the distraction.

Do nothing. Yes, you read that right. Nothing. Bushman's research has found that people who sat quietly for two minutes after the angering event, without being given any particular thing to think about, had the lowest anger and aggression levels.

Distract yourself. I've been recommending this approach for years. Pull your mind away from dwelling on the angering event by forcing it to do something else entirely, ideally something that you have to focus on – the crossword puzzle in today's paper, helping your teenager study for a Spanish exam, singing along to your favorite upbeat tunes. Research also supports this approach.

When able, look beneath the anger. [Psychologist Sherrie Bourg Carter describes anger](#) “as much a symptom as it is an emotion.” What's going on for you? What does the anger help you discover about yourself? What can you do to negotiate a resolution to the problem that precipitated the anger?

Tammy Lenski biography and additional articles:

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