

Is eye-rolling hazardous to your health?

Surprising research on ostracism reveals negative health impacts

You may have done it more than once. Someone on the team was behaving in his usual irritating way. Fed up and annoyed, you looked at another colleague and rolled your eyes. No big deal, just a spontaneous and harmless venting of authentic feelings.

But if Kipling Williams, a professor in the psychological sciences department at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., were in the vicinity, he'd be eager to study that annoying person's reactions to your eye-rolling. He'd examine his brain under a functional MRI (fMRI) machine to check which parts were activated when he was subjected to your eye-rolling. And he'd administer tests to trace your behaviour's exact impact on the person.

Williams, a leading researcher on ostracism, will then be able to show you how the person's dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) was fully activated in reaction to your eye-rolling.

Similarly, if someone banged someone else's finger with a hammer, that's the brain area that would get fired up and tests would demonstrate a statistically significant reduction in the injured person's sense of self-worth.

Even more interesting, Williams would note a significant drop in the person's finger temperature. It's no coincidence we use terms such as "out in the cold" or "getting the cold shoulder" to describe the experience of rejection.

In short, research will demonstrate the experience of ostracism has significant mental and physical health implications.

Unlikely bedfellows: Churches, teachers and angry husbands

Question: What is the common denominator among a teacher removing a child from her peers, a religious institution excommunicating a deviant member and a husband giving his wife the silent treatment?

Answer: All three practices are ostracism tactics that have withstood the test of time, across cultures and religions. They have survived because exclusion is an unbearable threat.

Humans are hard-wired to respond acutely to any signs of excommunication because, from the beginning of time, any sign of rejection by the tribe carried the threat of being physically banished, left to fend for ourselves in harsh circumstances. From an evolutionary perspective, you're one of the tribe or you perish.

Williams, therefore, speculated humans are equipped with extremely sensitive sensors for detecting even the most remote sig-



GUEST COMMENTARY

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nal of potential removal from the tribe. He set up fun experiments where, for example, an unsuspecting subject walks into an elevator and either is acknowledged by those already riding in it (inclusion) or ignored by them (ostracism). Surprisingly, even in such seemingly inconsequential circumstances, those who were subjected to the ostracism version showed a momentary downturn in mood.

In a series of "cyberball toss" experiments, Williams and his colleagues placed a subject under an fMRI and asked her to play a game of virtual toss-ball with two other people represented by cute, animated screen figurines. When the other players excluded the experiment's subject from their game for as little as three minutes, the subject's dACC became fired up, exactly as it would have flared up had someone smashed her finger with a hammer.

The recent research on ostracism, social exclusion and rejection consistently demonstrates even seemingly insignificant rejection experiences create a temporary state of misery, real pain, stress, sadness and anger, along with lower levels of belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence.

Ostracism in the workplace

In the workplace, ostracism can be found everywhere. Specifically, there are four prevalent situations that, by their very nature, will trigger ostracism experiences.

Biased managers: When a manager plays favourites or maintains personal friendships with some direct reports, those who are excluded will experience ostracism.

Diversity: Those who perceive themselves as different often feel rejected or excluded. And sometimes it is a member of a majority who feels ostracized. For example, a common complaint I hear when I consult or facilitate training pertains to people speaking a foreign language amongst themselves. The English-speaking person beside them often

feels excluded and rejected.

Incivility: Every workplace is hampered by some degree of gossip, cliques, lack of greetings, rude use of mobile devices and, yes, eye-rolling. Despite their seemingly inconsequential nature, these incivilities have serious organizational effects.

In a 2011 survey we designed in collaboration with *Canadian HR Reporter*, 93 per cent of respondents said incivility impacted productivity, 79 per cent noted it affected absenteeism and 90 per cent said incivility affected inter-departmental collaboration. What the work of Williams and his colleagues tells us is incivility actually hurts, on more than one level.

Bullying: When ostracizing behaviours are repetitive, especially if the behaviour is intentional and targeted, it amounts to full-blown workplace bullying. The repetitive nature of ostracism in its bullying form can render people physically and psychologically ill, and they're often unable to work at all. Essentially, bullying is cyberball magnified one million times.

Dilemmas and solutions

You can't eliminate ostracism experiences in the workplace unless you replace people with robots. On the other hand, an organization has an obligation to provide a workplace free of health and safety hazards.

Start by asking these questions:

- What do we see as our obligation to employees?
- How do we apply our organizational values in this arena?
- How do we identify ostracism?
- How effective are our leaders at modelling inclusiveness?
- What preventive practices can we build into our culture to inhibit or reduce ostracism?
- What policies do we need to prevent and deal with ostracism?
- How can we take effective action, without falling into "policing" or "political correctness?"

With behaviours ranging from subtle to blatant, ostracism poses complex organizational challenges. Now, scientific evidence proves the risk of doing nothing may be more costly to an organization than previously realized.

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