Introduction

Aggressive thoughts and behaviors can influence a person’s happiness and relationships. High levels of aggression can cause people to think and act in detrimental ways. Fortunately, psychological studies of aggression provide insight and tips regarding ways to reduce aggression. A review of three studies of aggression provides information about the role of internal and external factors, relationships, and time in the regulation and control of aggression.

“Aggression only moves in one direction — it creates more aggression.”

-Margaret J. Wheatley
The Research Explained

Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks (2003) examined the effects of violent song lyrics on aggressive cognitions and aggressive affect. Five experiments tested the state hostility, trait hostility, and accessibility of aggressive attitudes of participants after they listened to songs with violent and nonviolent lyrics. Participants were also tested after listening to a humorous violent song and a humorous non-violent song, while the control group did not listen to any song. Variables such as arousal were also tested in a few of the experiments. Anderson et al. (2003) hypothesized that participants who listened to the violent songs would score higher on state hostility and accessibility of aggression.

Huesmann and Guerra (1997) explored the relationship between normative beliefs about aggression and aggressive behavior among children. Researchers predicted that highly aggressive children should hold normative beliefs that support the use of aggression, that children who strongly approve of aggression would exhibit more aggressive behavior over time, and that acting in aggressive ways promotes the development of normative beliefs that approve of aggression. Researchers utilized two longitudinal studies in which elementary school students completed self-report measurements about their attitudes regarding aggression at different points in time. The study measured aggressive behaviors of participants through peer evaluations of the physical, verbal, and indirect aggressive tendencies of the children.

Wilkowski, Robinson, and Troop-Gordon (2010) researched how cognitive control and the ability to forgive affects levels of anger and aggression. The researchers conducted two different studies examining emotion regulation in college students. The first study exposed the students to a standard provocation and measured their response. The students then returned a week later and were exposed to loud white noise blasts that were from a supposed opponent. The students had to decide if they wanted to retaliate aggressively and return the noise or not. The second study required the college students to keep a three-week daily diary reporting provocations, forgiveness, expressive suppression, and daily anger. Researchers hypothesized that individuals who recruit cognitive control resources following the activation of a hostile thought are more efficient at overcoming response conflict. In addition, they predicted that forgiveness would be the critical emotion regulation operation leading to these cognitive control effects.

External Factors of Aggression

The media a person encounters in the outside world and a person’s external aggressive behaviors both influence their aggressive thoughts. Control of these external factors can help reduce the number of aggressive thoughts a person experiences.

Be Careful About the Media You Indulge In.
Anderson et al. (2003) found that listening to songs with violent lyrics increased access to aggressive thoughts and aggressive state hostility. Therefore, if you want to decrease your aggressive behaviors and attitudes, skip the violent songs the next time you listen to your iPod. Anderson et al. (2003) also found that listening to humorous songs with violent lyrics resulted in lower state hostility. This suggests that if you are going to listen to songs with violent lyrics, you should at least try to choose ones that are humorous as well.

Limit Outward Expressions of Aggression.
Huesmann and Guerra (1997) found that aggressive behavior appeared to increase the approval of aggression among younger children. These results suggest that during this formative time, children develop their normative beliefs by observing their own aggressive behaviors. Therefore, limiting outward expressions of aggression among young children could decrease their beliefs regarding the acceptability of aggression.
Internal Factors of Aggression

Regulation of internal factors including emotions, normative beliefs, and internal behavioral choices can reduce aggression.

Control Your Emotions.
The Wilkowski et al. (2010) study found that participants who were high in hostility-primed cognitive control were less aggressive in their selection of loud noise blasts to the opponent. Thus, people who are able to regulate their emotions effectively are able to control their anger and aggression appropriately following a provocation.

Monitor Your Beliefs.
Huesmann and Guerra (1997) discovered that normative beliefs about aggression serve as highly significant predictors of aggressive behaviors among older children. This finding suggests that a person who believes that aggression is highly acceptable is likely to engage in aggressive behaviors. In order to reduce aggressive actions, work to regulate your beliefs regarding the acceptability of aggression.

Be Aware of Primers.
Anderson et al. (2003) found that listening to songs with violent lyrics increased state hostility and aggression. If you are feeling aggressive, take a step back and see if something you are doing is possibly priming your aggressive construal. Being aware of the cause of your aggression may help you to remove yourself from that stimuli and begin to calm down.

Aggression in Relationships

Your interactions with others can significantly impact your aggressive thoughts and behaviors. In order to reduce aggression, try to keep company with nonaggressive people, and also strive to develop relationships characterized by forgiveness rather than retaliation.

Surround Yourself with Good Influences.
Huesmann and Guerra (1997) found that young children have unstable normative beliefs about aggression, which may demonstrate that early elementary school is a time when these beliefs are under development. Researchers suggested that young children develop their normative beliefs not only by observing their own aggressive behaviors but also by observing the actions of those around them. If you want to decrease your aggressive behaviors, choose to spend time with other people who do not frequently exhibit aggression.

Choose Forgiveness.
When in any interpersonal relationship, remember to always consider forgiveness before retaliation. Wilkowski et al. (2010) found that people who were able to forgive in situations of high provocation were also more likely to forgive in future provoking situations. By cultivating relationships characterized by forgiveness, you will be more likely to make friendships that consist of compassion and understanding versus aggression and retaliation.
Reducing Aggression

Time Effects of Aggression

*Levels of aggression are often highest immediately following an aggressive trigger or stimulus. You can reduce your aggression levels by giving yourself time to cool down before reacting.*

**Think Before You Act.**
The Wilkowski et al. (2010) study found that if a delay occurred between a provocation and the option to retaliate, that the relationship between hostility-primed cognitive control and lower aggression would strengthen. This suggests that creating a longer time period between a provocation and a reaction leads to more opportunities for forgiveness, thus reducing motivations for aggression. Therefore, when you are in a highly provoking situation, remember to take a minute to assess the entire situation and your emotional response before acting.

**Give it Time.**
Research by Anderson et al. (2003) found that participants who were tested on state hostility and aggression right after listening to a violent song had higher scores of aggression than those who were tested after performing other tasks. If you are feeling hostile, simply doing something else to distract yourself for a while may help to alleviate some of those aggressive feelings.

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**Citations**

