

The “Fly On the Wall” Way to Cool Anger

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A friend tells you off for something that wasn't your fault... a family member rudely criticizes your cooking... a sneaky coworker takes credit for your efforts. Under such provocation, it's natural for anger to flare. But stewing inwardly may only make you feel worse—and fighting back can fan the flames of conflict and do permanent damage to relationships.

Better option: There's a simple mental trick you can use in the heat of the moment to defuse fury and avert retaliatory aggression. All you need to do is take note of a method used in a recent study.

The research was designed to gauge the effects on anger and aggression of two different ways of dealing with provocation. The first way, which people tend to do spontaneously, is to *self-immense*—meaning to analyze a distressing memory while replaying the scene in your mind's eye, as if it were happening to you all over again. The second way is to *self-distance*—meaning to mentally move away from the situation and replay the event from a distance, as if seeing yourself from afar as you try to understand why you felt the way you did.

The study included two experiments. *First experiment:* While an intense piece of classical music blared, participants had to try to solve difficult word puzzles in just seven seconds each and report their answers via intercom. During the task, a researcher repeatedly interrupted on the intercom and then—as a deliberate provocation—snarled, “Look, this is the third time I have to say this! Can't you follow directions? Speak louder!” Immediately afterward, one group of participants was told to mentally review the episode from the self-immersion perspective...one group used the self-distancing perspective...and a control group got no instructions on perspective. Then participants rated their own level of anger. They also did a word-completion task designed to gauge aggressive thoughts—for instance, based on whether they completed *ki_ _* as *kiss* or *kite* or *kill*.

In the second experiment: The setup was identical except that each participant worked with an unseen “partner” (in reality, a researcher) to solve the word puzzles, and the partner delivered the scathing comments about following directions. After mentally reviewing the episode from their assigned perspectives, participants could deliver blasts of noise through their partners' headphones, selecting the blasts' decibel level and duration. Researchers used the noise blasts to assess the aggressiveness of participants' behaviors.

Results: Compared with the self-immersion groups and control groups, the self-distancing groups reported fewer angry feelings...had fewer aggressive thoughts...and exhibited lower levels of aggressive behavior.

Temper-taming tactic: Next time someone makes you mad, as you replay the event in your mind, instead of staying in the victim role, try to see yourself from the perspective of a fly on the wall. For instance, did your husband say that your pasta tastes like old glue? As you re-create the scene in your head and examine your feelings, imagine that you're seeing him sitting at a dinner table across a very large room, and that when he speaks the hurtful words, he's talking to a person who is 40 feet away from where you are at that moment. You have nothing to lose but your anger!

Source: Ethan Kross, PhD, is an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and coauthor of a study on self-distancing and aggressive behavior published in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.