

Revenge is a dish better left unmade

adapted from an article by Jennifer Breheny Wallace

- 1 While most of us won't engage in the type of vengeful displays that grab headlines or warrant prison time, our everyday lives often include small acts of retaliation such as gossiping about a neighbor who snubbed you or lashing out online after poor customer service. Evolutionary psychologists believe we are hardwired for revenge. Our earliest ancestors relied on the fear of retaliation to help keep the peace and correct injustices. "Acts of revenge acted as an insurance policy against future harm by others, a warning signal that you're someone who will not tolerate mistreatment," says Professor of Psychology Michael McCullough.
- 2 In modern life, betrayal and social rejection hurt. The desire to repair that pain and improve our mood may be one of the things that motivates us to seek revenge, according to six studies published this year in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.
- 3 Revenge may provide a lift, but the positive effects appear to be fleeting. "Revenge can feel really good in the moment," says David Chester, who studies the psychological and biological processes involved in human aggression, "but when we follow up with people five minutes, 10 minutes and 45 minutes later, they actually report feeling worse than they did before seeking revenge."
- 4 Professor Timothy Wilson conducted a study on the 32 of revenge. People think that they will feel better if they strike back, but when surveyed, those who had actually retaliated reported feeling worse than people who never had the opportunity to punish and so had moved on. "By not retaliating, we're able to find other ways of coping, like telling ourselves it wasn't such a big deal," Wilson theorizes.
- 5 Ruminating about getting even can interfere with day-to-day wellbeing and happiness. "When someone persists in revenge fantasies over time they can develop anxiety and remorse," says psychotherapist Beverly Engel. According to her, these feelings can also take up important cognitive resources, depleting time and energy that could be better spent.
- 6 Research suggests that when it comes to valuable relationships, "what the angry mind ultimately wants is a change of heart from the transgressor," Michael McCullough says. He claims it may be in your best interest to stay open to an apology and to help pave the road that would allow the offender to make it up to you. "Revenge may sometimes make you feel better for a moment," McCullough explains, "but making the effort to repair a valuable relationship can pay bigger dividends over a lifetime."

Washington Post, 2017