

Overcoming Violence

Can humans overcome their instinctive violent behavior?

Forgiveness Instead of Revenge

Revenge is defined as committing a harmful action against a person or group in response to a grievance, be it real or perceived. When a person takes action against another person whom they believe has wronged them, even if the action they take is violent, the reacting person *feels good*.

Addiction and neuroscience research strongly suggests that when a person seeks revenge, that person's brain operates in a manner identical to someone under the influence of an addictive drug.

The transmission of neural signals within the brain generates a sense of mental pain when someone is unfairly treated, which then triggers a sense of pleasure from the thought or action of retaliation. This pleasure from retaliation can be so strong that a person is unable to keep from retaliating, even though the person knows retaliation will ultimately cost more than it is worth.

Recent neuroscience research suggests that individuals prone to taking revenge will stop doing so if they simply forgive the grievance. This neuroscience approach points in a direction that has been followed by religions and philosophers for thousands of years.

The Brain's Automatic Responses

When two humans interact after an offended human perceives that an offending human has harmed the offended, a variety of automatic responses occur in the offended human's brain. The offended human's brain seeks to control both what that offended human *thinks* and how that

offended human *behaves*. The offended's brain also seeks to understand the circumstances and thinking of the offending human.

And, the offended human's brain considers the seriousness of the harm, how the offending human could possibly offer an apology, and how much the offended values the relationship with the offending human. If the offended human's brain is skillful during all this automatic processing, the process can lead the offended human to forgive rather than seek revenge.

You can train your brain to favor forgiveness by occasionally imagining that you forgive yourself and others, and then experience the immediate sense of relaxation that occurs as you imagine this.

Nonviolence

Historically, violence has almost always been met with further violence.

However, throughout human history there have been political movements and religions that reject the use of violence as a response to violence. These advocates of *nonviolence* have sought to directly stop violence, simply by refusing to be violent.

Advocates of nonviolence have frequently been ridiculed, persecuted, or killed because they would have prevented governments or commercial interests from exercising military power.

Even so, followers of many nonviolence movements have taken great risks because they were desperate to escape from oppressive conditions.

Just looking at European history, examples of nonviolence movements include the monastic movement, Franciscans, Manichaeism, Albigensians, Waldensians, Christian renewalists, the Unity of Brethren, and Anabaptists.

Appreciating Differences

When people actively appreciate and support their differences, violence isn't needed. When two people understand each other's perspectives and needs, they can work together to find innovations and compromises.

In many cultures, parents and teachers need to better understand and explain this view.

In modern times this truth is a founding assumption of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

To Learn More

To learn more about the spread of youth bullying, go to [From Bullied to Deviant - Whitney DeCamp, Brian Newby, 2014](#)

To learn more about cultures of peace, go to [Cultures of Peace, The Hidden Side of History, 2000](#)

To learn more about Elise Boulding, the author of *Cultures of Peace*, go to [Elise M. Boulding, Wikipedia](#)

To learn more about nonviolence, go to [Nonviolence, The History of a Dangerous Idea, 2009](#)

To learn more about Mark Kurlansky, the author of *Nonviolence, The History of a Dangerous Idea*, go to [Mark Kurlansky, Wikipedia](#)

To learn more about nonviolence and Martin Luther King Jr., go to [Nonviolence, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, 2025](#)

To learn more about the neuroanatomy of forgiveness, go to [How the brain heals emotional wounds, 2013](#)

To learn more about the science of revenge, go to [The Science of Revenge: Understanding the World's Deadliest Addiction—and How to Overcome It, 2025](#)

To learn more about James Kimmel, Jr., the author of The Science of Revenge, go to [James Kimmel, Jr., JD, Yale School of Medicine, 2025](#)

To learn more about the definition and history of revenge, go to [Revenge, Wikipedia](#)