

Emotion Regulation Training: Engaging in Cognitive Reappraisal May reduce Likelihood of Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration

The authors examined whether intimate partner violence (IPV) history and training in specific emotion regulation (ER) strategies (i.e., expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal) impacted the amount of aggressive verbalizations college students made during an anger-arousing task. Students provided with brief cognitive reappraisal training engaged in significantly fewer aggressive verbalizations than students who received expressive suppression or no training. These results suggest that skills training in specific ER strategies may help prevent or decrease incidents of IPV.

Maldonado, R. C., DiLillo, D., & Hoffman, L. (2015). Can college students use emotion regulation strategies to alter intimate partner aggression-risk behaviors? An examination using I³ theory. *Psychology of Violence, 5*, 46-55. doi: 10.1037/a0035454

Summary and Commentary by Sapir Sasson, MA and Sarah Ramsey, MA, Department of Psychology, Northern Illinois University

Introduction:

- The ability to manage one's own experience and expression of negative emotions (i.e., emotion regulation) has been shown to play a role in perpetration of intimate partner violence (IPV).
- Changing the way one views a given situation (i.e., cognitive reappraisal) is more effective in reducing the impact of negative emotions, generally leading to more positive social outcomes (e.g., fewer aggressive behaviors), than does masking one's emotions after they arise (i.e., expressive suppression).
 - These findings suggest that interventions designed to teach effective emotion regulation skills may also bring about reductions in IPV perpetration.
- While existing interventions have demonstrated efficacy in changing aggression-supportive attitudes, there is a paucity of research on psychotherapeutic interventions that lead to reductions in aggressive behaviors.
- The primary goal of the study was to evaluate whether utilizing cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression strategies affect aggressive verbalizations in response to anger-arousing hypothetical scenarios.
 - Aggressive verbalizations were defined as verbal aggression (e.g., insulting or demeaning statements), threats of physical aggression (e.g., expressing desire to hit or shove), and belligerence (e.g., provoking, threatening, or challenging statements)
- Hypotheses
 1. IPV perpetrators will engage in more aggressive verbalizations than non-IPV perpetrators in the anger arousing task.
 2. Individuals trained in cognitive reappraisal will engage in fewer aggressive verbalizations than individuals trained in expressive suppression or individuals given no instruction in the anger arousing task.

3. IPV perpetrators who are trained in expressive suppression or given no instruction will engage in more aggressive verbalizations than non-IPV perpetrators in the anger arousing task.
 - IPV perpetrators and non-IPV perpetrators trained in cognitive reappraisal will not differ in their engagement of aggressive verbalizations during the anger arousing task.

Method:

- Participants
 - Participants were 236 male and female undergraduate students, with a mean age of 19.88 (SD = 2.75), involved in a committed heterosexual relationship.
 - Participants who reported no instances of physical IPV perpetration over the past six months were classified into the non-IPV group (n = 75 males, 93 females); those who reported committing one or more acts of physical IPV perpetration over the past six months were classified into the IPV group (n = 23 males, 45 females).
- Measures
 - Participants received brief instructions to use cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, or no instruction on how to regulate their emotions in response to the anger-arousing scenarios.
 - Participants listened to three audio scenarios (one neutral, two anger-arousing) depicting hypothetical college-relevant dating situations and were asked to imagine that they were involved in each of these scenarios.
 - Participants were instructed to provide verbal responses to the anger-provoking scenarios, which were recorded and analyzed at regular intervals for aggressive verbalizations (insults, threats of physical aggression, and belligerent statements). The researchers used the frequency of aggressive verbalizations as their measure of aggression in the study.
 - Participants completed a mood rating scale before listening to the neutral audio scenario and again after listening to each of the three provocative audio scenarios

Results:

- Hypothesis 1: Not Supported
 - IPV perpetrators *did not* engage in significantly more aggressive verbalizations than non-IPV perpetrators in the anger arousing task.
- Hypothesis 2: Supported
 - Individuals trained in cognitive reappraisal engaged in *significantly fewer* aggressive verbalizations than individuals trained in expressive suppression or given no instruction in the anger arousing task. No significant differences were found between individuals trained in expressive suppression and those who were given no instruction.
- Hypothesis 3: Partially Supported
 - IPV perpetrators trained in cognitive reappraisal engaged in *significantly fewer* aggressive verbalizations than non-IPV perpetrators in the anger arousing task.
 - IPV perpetrators *did not* significantly differ from non-IPV perpetrators when trained in expressive suppression or given no instruction in their engagement of aggressive verbalizations during the anger arousal task.

- However, IPV perpetrators trained in expressive suppression did engage in significantly more aggressive verbalizations compared to all participants trained in cognitive reappraisal.

Discussion:

- The authors acknowledged the possibility that some of the participants in the non-IPV group engaged in IPV perpetration outside of the 6-month timeframe utilized in this study (e.g., one year ago), which would have placed these individuals in the non-IPV group and potentially affected the findings of the study.
- Overall, the authors concluded that cognitive reappraisal is an adaptive emotion regulation strategy that may reduce aggressive verbalizations, which are postulated to serve as a precursor to IPV perpetration.

Applications and Comments by Reviewer

- The authors' finding that both IPV perpetrators and non-perpetrators trained in brief cognitive reappraisal strategies engaged in fewer aggressive verbalizations holds important implications for IPV prevention and intervention programs.
 - Several "third wave" behavioral therapy techniques, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and Mindfulness-based therapy, include emotion regulation skills training as a core component of treatment.
 - Incorporating therapeutic techniques that include training in effective emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, into prevention and intervention programs may produce meaningful results in reducing the incidence of IPV by attempting to reduce aggressive verbalizations.
- Although participants provided examples of expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal after undergoing brief training for each, it is unclear whether participants correctly applied each strategy.
- The authors claimed that cognitive reappraisal techniques should have reduced participants' negative affect. However, it should be noted that:
 - Therapeutic techniques that utilize emotion regulation skills training have established an important distinction between 1) one's experience of negative emotion and 2) how one behaves based on these emotions.
 - The development of more effective emotion regulation skills, such as cognitive reappraisal, does not purport to reduce individuals' actual experiences of negative emotionality. Rather, these practices help people to acknowledge, accept, and effectively cope with these feelings in order to facilitate more adaptive behaviors.
 - Thus, the expectation that participants' negative emotionality should have decreased as a result of the skills training is debatable.

Practitioner Implications: Mary Ellen Schaid, Executive Director, Safe Passage, DeKalb, Illinois [Safe Passage is a Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Crisis Center which also operates a Partner Abuse Intervention Program (PAIP), approved by the State of Illinois]

- **Importance for clinical work:** It appears the curriculum discussed in the article was created with good intentions and shows possibility as a viable therapeutic

intervention with a population of IPV offenders. But it also shows the need for testing in real life situations because we would hypothesize that research on undergraduate student response in a controlled setting is going to look different in the population that generally is ordered into offender treatment programs.

- **Real-world implications:** We would be interested in collaborating with researchers to develop and test activities/exercises that teach cognitive reappraisal techniques or strategies that could be incorporated into a psycho-educational group setting for a population that is largely court ordered, some DCFS or self-referred, such as what we provide in our Partner Abuse Intervention Program for both men and women charged with domestic violence.
- **Suggestions for clinicians, advocates, prevention and intervention efforts:** This is a valuable area of study that should continue to be researched, with real-life populations. Strong collaborations between researchers and clinicians should be encouraged and followed through on to accomplish this. Clinicians should look for ways to incorporate cognitive reappraisal and emotional regulation education within their practices. Cognitive reappraisal and emotional regulation lessons and encouragement could be incorporated into prevention efforts that focus on a public health model and encouraged as socially normative.