

Rudeness Is Contagious

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We experience rudeness and incivility all the time. From simple insults and offhand remarks to purposely excluding others from groups, these behaviors are largely tolerated in our daily lives and in the workplace. The question is, what effect do these behaviors have on us?

It's pretty clear that high-intensity negative behaviors like abuse, aggression and violence are harmful. But what's the harm in just being rude and uncivil?

A growing body of research offers compelling evidence that experiencing rudeness, and even simply witnessing rudeness, can have surprisingly harmful effects on performance, creativity and even helpfulness. However, it might not even end there.

What if rudeness was actually contagious? This would mean that rudeness may not only hurt those who experience or witness it, but also have secondary effects. People who've experienced rude behavior from others are now "infected" with rudeness themselves, and will be rude to the people they interact with next.

Office rudeness is contagious, just like the common cold

To explore this phenomenon, my colleagues and I at the University of Florida (Andrew Woolum and Amir Erez) conducted [a study](#) to find out if rudeness was contagious from one person to another.

Over the course of a seven-week period, the participants (students engaged in a negotiations course) engaged in 11 negotiations exercises with various partners. After each negotiation, participants had the opportunity to rate how rudely their negotiation partner had behaved. The structure of this exercise allowed us to explore how rudeness could be contagious by examining how the rudeness experienced in one negotiation influenced rude behaviors in the next negotiation. We didn't instruct participants to be rude; we simply measured the normal rudeness that was present in the negotiation setting.

We found that rudeness is in fact contagious. If negotiators felt that their negotiation partner was rude, when they went on to their next negotiation, their new partner in turn perceived them as rude.

Another surprising finding was how long this effect lasted. Some of the negotiations took place one after another, and some took place up to seven days apart. We found that the time between negotiations didn't seem to matter. Even if negotiations were a week apart, the rudeness experienced in the previous negotiation still caused participants to be rude in their next negotiation.

Why does rudeness spread from one person to another?

Prior research has shown that both [emotions](#) and [behaviors](#) can be socially contagious. For example, when people around you are feeling happy, it is likely that you will start [to feel happy too](#). Similarly, when people around you tap their toes or fold their arms, often you will start doing the same thing. Since these effects are usually described as simple subconscious mimicry, they probably can't describe why rudeness can make us more rude. So how does it happen?

To tackle this question, we explored whether a process occurring in a subconscious part of the brain was responsible. When we experience social stimuli (like a conversation with a coworker), they can activate concepts deep in the subconscious part of our brains. A concept could be anything. We have a concept for anger, happiness, sadness, power, and, of course, rudeness. The activation of concepts is automatic – meaning when it happens, we aren't aware of it. And when concepts are activated, this changes the way we perceive the world a little bit.

For example, just seeing a happy face could [activate the happiness](#) concept, causing us to perceive future stimuli as more happy. Furthermore, researchers have found that when people write a short vignette about power, that can activate the power concept, causing people [to feel more powerful](#).

So if that rude concept is activated, it causes us to perceive stimuli as a little bit more rude. And that's what we found in two experimental studies. When people experienced (or even witnessed) rudeness, they noticed rudeness in their environment more, making them more likely to perceive things as rude, and this perception of rudeness caused them to respond with rudeness.

For example, imagine someone walking by you and saying "Hey, nice shoes!" You might interpret that as a compliment, or you might interpret it as an insult – it's sort of hard to tell, and your brain has to decide. Well, when you've recently experienced rudeness, you are more likely to perceive that comment as rude even if it wasn't meant that way. Then, subsequently, you will respond to the perceived rudeness with more rudeness.

What is so scary about this effect is that it's an automatic process – it takes place in a part of your brain that you are not aware of, can't stop, and can't control. So, you would not necessarily be aware that the reason you (mis)interpreted the "nice shoes" comment is that you had recently experienced rudeness. This means you can't temper the process.

Just don't be rude

This evidence that rudeness is contagious really underscores how harmful these behaviors can be, particularly in organizational settings.

While [prior evidence showed](#) that rudeness could be harmful to performance, creativity and helpfulness, this research shows that the effects are not limited to the parties of the rude interaction.

In this way, rudeness can spread out like a virus, not only harming the performance of those who experience it but also making them carriers likely to pass the harm on to those with whom they interact next.

This means that maybe we need to rethink what behaviors are acceptable in the workplace. Behaviors like aggression, abuse, and violence are not tolerated at work, but sometimes rudeness tacitly is – but maybe it shouldn't be. Up to [98%](#) of workers report that they have experienced rudeness in the office, and 50% say they experience it weekly. So just be nice.

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