

A 'guilt trip' is the road to cooperation

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A new study has found that feeling guilty has a positive effect on our behaviour and leads to better cooperation - a discovery that could help people better manage everything from dog mess and energy bills to climate change.

The study – 'Guilty repair sustains cooperation, angry retaliation destroys it' - published in *Scientific Reports*, was carried out at the University of Nottingham. It shows that [guilt](#) encourages people to repair a situation and helps to support cooperation, whilst anger creates retaliation and a breakdown in cooperation.

With the help of volunteers the research team looked into the role of emotions. Using a scenario based around shared energy use in the home they found that when energy use was made visible with smart meters and usage is unequal, as is common, the group reacted angrily and retaliated by using more energy. But if the person using more [energy](#) felt guilty and

moderated their usage the situation would be repaired and cooperation restored.

Psychologist, Dr Anya Skatova, who led the study while she was with the Horizon Digital Economy Research at Nottingham, is now at the Warwick Business School. She said: "We all know the term 'guilt trip' and understand how it feels. Our study shows that rather than being wholly negative, feelings of guilt can actually be positive and lead to positive behavior and improve cooperation."

Dr Alexa Spence, from the University of Nottingham's School of Psychology and Horizon Digital Economy Research, and a co-author of the study said: "The implications of this study are far reaching. If we understand that guilt leads to cooperation we can begin to recognise this and moderate our engagement activities accordingly to improve it. Cooperation is vital to everyday life, from the very small annoyances like not picking up dog mess on the street to the larger political landscape. Recognising that anger can harm cooperation and guilt encourages cooperation could actually lead to a more harmonious society."

Their research also showed that while everybody feels angry if others are uncooperative causing retaliation, some people just don't feel guilt and remain uncooperative. This imbalance causes decline in [cooperation](#).

More information: Anya Skatova et al. Guilty repair sustains cooperation, angry retaliation destroys it, *Scientific Reports* (2017). [DOI: 10.1038/srep46709](https://doi.org/10.1038/srep46709)

Provided by University of Nottingham

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