

Offenders turning remorse into self-punishment to show contrition can sway people in their favor

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In one of the first demonstrations of its kind, the Flinders University-led international study questioned hundreds of adults about acts of self-punishment which managed to garner their sympathy for the offender.

"Our research showed that even though people who self-punish may not aim to communicate their [remorse](#) with others, it can still help third-party observers understand their need for forgiveness or reconciliation with others," says German researcher Dr. Stefanie Hechler, a visiting scholar at Flinders University, South Australia.

"Self-punishment—which ranges from [physical harm](#) to [social withdrawal](#)—can jeopardize relationships and be seen as a pathological and dysfunctional response to having done something wrong.

"Yet, at the same time, even small acts of self-punishment may have an interpersonal function to restore those relationships in jeopardy."

In turn, this behavior might increase observers' willingness to reconcile with the offender.

The research, published in the international *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, used the results of four studies conducted in the U.S. and Germany to test experimentally the effects of self-punishment on perceptions of remorse among third parties.

Flinders University Professor Michael Wenzel says the study demonstrates that self-punishment communicates messages of remorse, in a similar way as a verbal message from the offender does.

"Self-punishment is interpreted as the offender's reaffirmation of the violated values as well as their own status degradation, so it addresses important concerns of others, such as 'Does the offender endorse the same values as I do?' or 'Does the [offender](#) think they are better than

others?" adds Professor Wenzel, from the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

Prolonged [social exclusion](#) and [self-harm](#) also can be destructive when offenders do not get support in making amends to society in more positive ways, researchers warn.

"By extension, this study points to the problematic way society deals with wrongdoing, to the extent that it engages in exclusionary practices, or how the community refuses to even acknowledge the possibility of redemption," adds Flinders University co-author Dr. Melissa de Vel-Palumbo, from the College of Business, Government and Law.

"One of the symbolic functions of self-punishment we have identified is the chance for offenders to signal that they endorse shared social norms," she says.

"But if we don't allow offenders to engage in pro-[social roles](#) and activities upon their return to society, including meaningful employment after a [criminal conviction](#), then how can offenders demonstrate their commitment to pro-[social norms](#)?"

"At the very least, we should support and create opportunities for people to demonstrate their commitment to a pro-social life."

Dr. de Vel-Palumbo adds that restorative justice conferences is another way for offenders to communicate their remorse directly in a face-to-face interaction with their victims.

"It is not suitable for every offense, but it's one way [offenders](#) can show their remorse, And by agreeing to make amends in a manner that is generally satisfying to victims and the community, these sorts of procedures might more constructively pave the way to forgiveness and

reintegration."

The article, "What does being hard on yourself communicate to others? The role of symbolic implications of self-punishment in attributions of remorse," by Stefanie Hechler, Michael Wenzel, Lydia Woodyatt and Melissa de Vel-Palumbo, has been published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

More information: Stefanie Hechler et al, What does being hard on yourself communicate to others? The role of symbolic implications of self-punishment in attributions of remorse, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104305](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104305)

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