

Focus needed on whether punishment harms or improves, suggests study

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The logic that often underlies support for punitive approaches to crime, such as imprisonment, is a belief that an aversive experience will "put people off" or "teach them a hard lesson" about what they've done

wrong. However, this has not proved to be true—and researchers at Flinders University are looking at ways that more positive messaging can change the attitude of transgressors.

"We know that harsher punishment doesn't make people change, and in fact can make things worse, so we need to know in what circumstances punishment is an effective deterrent," says Dr. Melissa de Vel-Palumbo, from Flinders University's College of Business, Government and Law.

Researchers examined messages conveyed to people during punishment and explored how people make sense of why they are being punished. The findings are published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*.

"We find it's critical that people see their punishment as a genuine effort to restore positive relations between the transgressor, the victim, and/or society more broadly," says Dr. de Vel-Palumbo.

"The transgressor will ask themselves 'Is this person punishing me just to harm me, or to help me become a better person?' We find that these sorts of attributions matter in determining how people respond to punishment."

The researchers found that if punishment is seen by transgressors as a pathway to reintegration, they respond more positively to it, accepting the punishment and showing more compliance with norms.

In contrast, punishment interpreted as a means to humiliate and socially exclude a person can backfire, leading people to reject the punisher and the values they aim to promote.

This idea is consistent with authoritative-style parenting, which is effective in disciplining children. "It's important to enforce standards while showing warmth and understanding," says Dr. de Vel-Palumbo.

"If authorities treat people with respect, people will infer trustworthy motives—what we call relationship-oriented motives—which makes people trust and accept what authorities say."

Dr. de Vel-Palumbo says this follows the [logic](#) of restorative justice, "that punishment should imply belongingness, and that we should judge the act, not the person," she says, "but nobody had robustly tested the idea that subjective perceptions of motives specifically are key to these types of effects—and that's what we showed in our studies.

"Our research suggests that authorities and institutions should direct some of their focus away from the severity of sanctions towards a careful consideration of the messages they communicate to transgressors about the purpose of their punishment.

"To maximize pro-social outcomes, authorities should aim to convey relationship-oriented motives as much as possible when delivering sanctions."

Therefore, the researchers say the explicit communication of motives needs rethinking.

"When punishing others, we often tell others why we are punishing them. In legal contexts, it is often customary for judges to provide justifications for a sanction during sentencing. For example, they might say that the [punishment](#) needs to reassure the victim that justice has been served. While conveying these types of justifications might serve other desired goals, such as validating the victim, our findings suggest that such messages are unlikely to be constructive in reforming people," says Dr. de Vel-Palumbo.

"Retributive [messages](#), in courts and beyond, might rather be formulated using relationship-oriented language—for instance, by saying that the

imposition of suffering might pave the way to forgiveness."

More information: Melissa de Vel-Palumbo et al, Making sense of punishment: Transgressors' interpretation of punishment motives determines the effects of sanctions, *British Journal of Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12638](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12638)

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