

# Aggression in restaurant kitchens makes for good TV but lousy working conditions, say researchers: Q&A

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Emmy-nominated popular drama *The Bear* and Gordon Ramsey's reality show *Hell's Kitchen* may be television portrayals. But they underscore

the harsh truth about what can really go down when working in a hot, cramped, chaotic environment—essentially a pressure cooker, according to FIU Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management researchers Andrew Moreo and Lisa Cain.

What might make for good entertainment, though, can be damaging in real life, for both employees and employers.

Familiar with the behind-the-scenes of the [restaurant industry](#), assistant professors Moreo, a former chef trained at the Culinary Institute of America, and Cain, with years of fine dining experience, led a study of ways to dial down the chance of explosive outbursts. Now, they break down their findings, published in *Journal of Foodservice Business Research*.

## **Why is anger such a problem in this industry?**

It's fast-paced, high stress, with long 10- to 12-hour days. Success relies on good communication—from the guest to the server, then from the server to the back of the house, and back again. Once the ticket gets to the kitchen, in many kitchens someone then must read out the ticket to the people responsible for putting together the order. There's room for error. When things go wrong, communication tends to break down and can cause tempers to flair.

Then, there's also the fact that suffering is a long-standing tradition, a sort of rite of passage, in many high-end and Michelin Star restaurants. The brigade system, introduced in the 19th century by Georges-Auguste Escoffier, is the kitchen management model used today—and it's based on a militaristic model.

Stemming from this, it's no surprise that verbal and [physical abuse](#) and a toxic, hyper-masculine work environment have been pervasive for nearly

two centuries. With a historically toxic climate and culture as the foundation, it is easy to see why the kitchen has lent itself to [anger](#) behaviors.

The good news is the culture has shifted. There are now laws and policies. For example, a restaurant inside of a major branded hotel, like a Marriott, would have to follow Marriott policies, so chefs can't act like we might see on Hell's Kitchen without severe consequences. But there is still a lot of work to be done—as "bad behavior" might be a bigger problem at smaller organizations, like at mom-and-pop restaurants.

## **What's the impact of anger?**

Anger has ripple effects. Past research has looked at retail and health care workers, for example, and shown team functionality was negatively impacted by higher levels of anger, leading to more stress.

But it's not understood how this translates to the restaurant industry. There's a gap in the academic literature surrounding anger in the restaurant industry, as well as a need for understanding and guidance to better manage these situations, that we wanted to fill.

We wanted to look at what might influence anger—looking at both individual personalities and environmental factors. So, how perceived support—an environmental factor—can maybe temper aggression. We have many friends and colleagues in the industry dealing with these issues. Our goal was to gather data that could be shared with managers and industry professionals, so they could make data-informed decisions and help prevent situations where people are angry and aggressive.

## **How did you look at what might prevent angry outbursts in the kitchen?**

We started with a preliminary screening, done through a survey that used the Conditional reasoning test of aggression (CRT-A)—it gave a scenario and then the respondent would choose how they'd react. It's sort of like a Myers–Briggs personality test. It gave a baseline that measured their innate level of aggression.

It's important to mention anger is a normal emotion and everyone experiences it—meaning everyone has some level of innate aggression in them. Certain situations and external factors can bring it out. Then, the emotion of anger can become a behavior, in this case, an outburst or outward aggression, depending on a situation or environment.

So, in the later part of the study, we also asked about workplace anger reactions and perceived supervisory and organizational support, or whether employees believe there is a concern for their well-being and that their contributions are valued.

## **What did you find?**

A supportive direct supervisor can play a very important role in terms of impacting behavior. Our study showed people who perceived less supervisory support were more likely to have more anger reactions in the workplace.

Employees want to feel a [personal connection](#), to be seen and supported by the people they see every day, their direct supervisors. Really, this speaks to the notion of "people don't quit jobs, people quit people."

## **What practical implications for the restaurant industry, or suggestions. did you include in this paper?**

At the organizational level, it starts with hiring the "right" people. A good supervisor doesn't just have the competencies they need to do the job, but also the soft skills. Do they have a supportive leadership style? Can they emphasize, sympathize and show compassion? A supportive supervisor remembers that the people who work for them aren't just numbers. If someone feels like a cog in a machine, they are going to be more frustrated and that could lead to more incidences of anger.

Supervisors should also show recognition. And even something as simple as asking how someone is doing can make a difference.

There are glimpses of all of this in shows like "The Bear" and "Hell's Kitchen." It's not only just screaming, yelling and fighting. You see what happens when someone is told that something they cooked tastes good. It makes someone's entire mood change. You see how the entire atmosphere of a restaurant can change when leaders show they care and demonstrate compassion.

You may have heard the saying, "If you can't take the heat, get out of the [kitchen](#)." Instead, we suggest you simmer down and lead with compassion.

**More information:** Andrew Moreo et al, Implicit and explicit aggression among restaurant employees: The moderating effect of perceived support, *Journal of Foodservice Business Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/15378020.2021.1899963](https://doi.org/10.1080/15378020.2021.1899963)

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