

People overestimate social consequences of saying no to an invitation, finds study

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It may feel unforgivably rude to reject an invitation—even one to an event you would much prefer not to attend—but people often overestimate the social consequences of saying no, according to research

published by the American Psychological Association.

"I was once invited to an event that I absolutely did not want to attend, but I attended anyways because I was nervous that the person who invited me would be upset if I did not—and that appears to be a [common experience](#)," said lead author Julian Givi, Ph.D., an assistant professor at West Virginia University.

"Our research shows, however, that the negative ramifications of saying no are much less severe than we expect." The research was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

More than three-quarters of respondents (77%) in a [pilot study](#) confessed to accepting an invitation to an activity they did not want to attend because they were concerned about the consequences of declining. To examine whether these fears were unfounded, researchers conducted five experiments with more than 2,000 total participants.

In one experiment, the researchers asked participants to read a scenario where they either invited or were invited by one of their friends to a dinner on a Saturday night at a local restaurant with a celebrity chef. The participants who were given the invitation were told to imagine they declined because they already had plans during the day and wanted to spend a night at home relaxing. The participants who imagined giving the invitation were told their friend declined for the same reason.

The researchers found that participants who imagined turning down their friend's invitation often believed it would immediately have negative ramifications for their relationship.

They were more likely to say that their friend would feel angry, disappointed and unlikely to invite them to attend future events than the participants who imagined being rejected rated themselves. This may be

because participants who rejected the invitation were also more likely than those who were rejected to say their friend would focus on the rejection itself rather than the deliberations that went on inside their friend's head before they declined.

"Across our experiments, we consistently found that invitees overestimate the negative ramifications that arise in the eyes of inviters following an invitation decline," Givi said. "People tend to exaggerate the degree to which the person who issued the invitation will focus on the act of the invitee declining the invitation as opposed to the thoughts that passed through their head before they declined."

In another experiment, the researchers recruited 160 people to participate in what was called a "couples survey" with their significant other. Of the couples who participated, 4% had been together for less than six months, 1% six to 12 months, 21% one to five years and 74% had been together for more than five years.

First, one member of the couple was asked to leave the room where the survey was taking place. The remaining participant wrote an invitation to their [partner](#) for an activity they would like to do in the next several weeks—such as see a movie, eat at a restaurant or go hiking in a park.

Then they left the room and their partner returned. Upon reading the invitation, the partner was asked to write a rejection that said something along the lines of, "I just want to stay at home and relax." The couple then traded places again so the person who wrote the invitation could read the rejection.

Regardless of the length of the couples' relationship, the researchers found that the person who rejected their partner's invitation to a fun activity tended to believe that their partner would be angrier or more likely to feel as if the rejection meant they did not care about their

partner than they actually did.

The researchers believe their findings show people consistently overestimate how upset someone will be when they decline an invitation, even if they have a longstanding, close relationship.

"While there have been times when I have felt a little upset with someone who declined an invitation, our research gives us quite a bit of good reason to predict people overestimate the negative ramifications for our relationships," said Givi.

Givi also says that people could benefit from turning down invitations on occasion when it could help them avoid burnout, as doing so will not necessarily have the major consequences they expect it will.

"Burnout is a real thing, especially around the holidays when we are often invited to too many events," he said. "Don't be afraid to turn down invitations here and there. But, keep in mind that spending time with others is how relationships develop, so don't decline every invitation."

More information: Julian Givi, Ph.D. Saying no: The negative ramifications from invitation declines are less severe than we think, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000443](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000443)

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