

Venting your frustrations can make friends like you better—if you do it right

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Venting about your frustrations with one friend to another isn't necessarily cathartic, but it can make the friend you're talking to like and treat you better, UCLA psychologists say. Their experiments show that

under certain conditions, it can be an effective form of competition that makes listeners feel closer to the person venting and like the target less.

However, this was not the case when people's friends overtly derogated others. The real benefits of venting, the researchers conclude, are the strengthening of bonds that might pay off in the future—and the [improved health](#) and happiness enjoyed by people who are well liked by their friends.

"Since the 1950s, we've known the Freudian catharsis explanation for venting is wrong. It can feel good to [vent](#), but venting doesn't reliably decrease anger and sometimes even amplifies anger," said lead author Jaimie Krems, an associate professor of psychology at UCLA. "We didn't have a good explanation for what venting does for us. So we tested a novel alliance view of venting—that under certain parameters, venting can make the people we vent to support us over the people we vent about."

Most research on [close relationships](#) has focused on romantic partnerships. Yet, especially for [younger people](#), friendship plays some of the roles that have traditionally been found in [romantic relationships](#); the U.S. surgeon general has also talked about the "loneliness epidemic." There is a need to better understand friendship, researchers say, including how people might 'compete' to make their friends like them better than other friends.

"As much as people readily admit that we compete for romantic partners' finite time and affection, people seem less willing to admit to competing for friends," Krems said. "But if being relatively better liked means getting better support from friends, then we should expect some friend competition, whether or not we like that it exists."

In a paper [published in *Evolution and Human Behavior*](#), Krems and

colleagues at Oklahoma State University and Hamilton College asked participants to listen to a friend vent or gossip about or derogate a mutual friend. Although the vignettes varied across experiments, those venting typically began by telling participants, "I'm so frustrated and hurt right now..." before venting about a mutual friend canceling on them at the last minute.

In the derogation condition, this same complaint was prefaced with: "I'm so frustrated and angry right now..." In other conditions, the participant heard the speaker gossip about having dinner with the mutual friend or vent about the speaker's car problems.

After reading the vignette, participants rated their feelings about the speaker and the target on an 11-point sliding scale. Participants who heard people vent about a friend canceling on them liked the speaker better than the target. This was not the case when speakers derogated the target for the same behavior, shared neutral gossip about targets or vented about their car troubles.

In another experiment, participants heard their friends vent about or derogate the target and were asked to divide a pot of lottery tickets between the speaker and target. Participants gave more tickets to the speaker than to the target, but only in the venting—not the derogation—condition.

However, venting backfired in an additional experiment. When researchers hinted the person venting was secretly rivalrous with the targeted friend, participants no longer liked that person better than the target.

The results show that venting makes the speaker more likable only when listeners do not perceive the [speaker](#) as having any aggressive intent toward the target. This suggests venting might be an effective tool of

competition for listeners' affections precisely because it isn't readily recognized as such.

The benefits of being relatively better liked by one's friends can include being given [preferential treatment](#), as in the ticket example above, but could also have less tangible effects. For example, friends are associated with improved economic mobility, health, well-being and longevity.

The researchers emphasize that none of this competition has to be conscious, and some other scholars have suggested that such tactics might work best if we're fooling ourselves that we're not competing. If we don't think we're doing it to be aggressive, others might be less likely to realize we're engaging in what might be an act of aggression.

The researchers also emphasize the ways in which venting can fail, such as when those venting are perceived as aggressive, choose the wrong thing to vent about or the wrong person to vent to. That venting works at all suggests, they say, that people can be deeply—if not consciously—strategic about what they vent about and to whom.

"People are so lonely right now, and that puts even greater pressure on us as researchers to be honest about how friendship works," Krems said.

"As much as we want it to be all unicorns and rainbows, sometimes it's more like a koala: cuddly but also vicious."

More information: Jaimie Arona Krems et al, Venting makes people prefer—and preferentially support—us over those we vent about, *Evolution and Human Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2024.106608](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2024.106608)

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