Rage Rooms Not a Good Idea: Are you “letting off steam” in a rage room or motivating future aggression?

Kevin Bennett
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A recent news report documented the increase in the number of rage rooms across the country. The demand is real: Between school, work, terrorism, bullying, and debt there is a lot to worry about. In fact, according to the most recent data from NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), 42 million Americans, or 18 percent, live with anxiety disorders.

Rage rooms offer a place to go for people who are feeling the impulse to become physically violent, but they do not want the mess that comes with attacking others. Is this a good prescription for chronic ragers?

Unfortunately, many people still subscribe to the “aggression as a pressure cooker” model of human behavior. According to this logic, if you don’t let off some steam or release your aggression in a timely manner it will manifest itself in dangerous, weird, and inappropriate ways. Do not hold it in for too long or you will eventually go berserk and lose all control. Hence, the rage room. For a few bucks you can spend time liberating pent up hostility by annihilating coffee cups with a baseball bat. It certainly sounds fun, but does it work?

Here is the problem: When you spend time thumping an inanimate object, like a pillow, or beating nonliving things in a rage room, you are conditioning yourself to quickly become aggressive next time your anxiety levels rise. So instead of opening up the escape valve on a pot of steam, you are rewarding your distressed feelings with the instant and ephemeral pleasure that comes from throwing dishes against a wall.

Frustration is a real emotion that you are allowed to feel from time to time, and we frequently do when someone or something is in conflict with a goal. This “strategic interference,” as evolutionary psychologists call it, pops up everywhere. It is not uncommon in my building for the vending machine to strategically interfere with the delivery of cola. The resulting frustration is similar to your boss telling you to come into the office on Saturday or asking if you got the memo on the TPS reports.

Frustration can quickly escalate to aggression, but this does not have to be the case. Venting aggression is not a healthy long-term strategy. In a sense, rage rooms are conditioning people to convert impulses and irritations into physical assault.
Dammit Dolls, small and punchable, are like pocket-sized rage rooms. Each has a label that reads: “Whenever things don’t go so well and you want to hit the wall and yell here’s a little Dammit Doll that you can’t do without. Just grasp it firmly by the legs and find a place to slam it. And as you whack the stuffing out, yell ‘DAMMIT! DAMMIT! DAMMIT!’” In the event of anger, don’t take it out on the people around you, pummel a goofy doll against the edge of a coffee table. Right? But people who rely on such devices end up showing more anger in the long run than the people who do not use them.

From an evolutionary standpoint, there were certainly times in our ancestral past when physical confrontation was the quickest solution to a problem like protecting offspring from attack. However, we don’t live in an ancestral environment anymore. We live in an evolutionarily novel context where the adaptive solutions of the past don’t always match up with the adaptive problems we confront today. We should be working towards minimizing aggression and violence in society, not encouraging it even if it is dressed up as a fun afternoon demolishing things normally off limits.