

# Let it all out: Yes or No?

Some analysts encourage violent release of aggressive feelings. But some results of experimental psychology indicate this might not be a good idea.

by Robert J. Trotter

From a leather couch in Vienna to a heated swimming pool in California, from one-hour sessions with an analyst to 24-hour marathons with a group, from an intellectual attempt to uncover subconscious motivations to a variety of emotion-packed, let-it-all-hang-out approaches—psychotherapy has come a long way in the 75 years since Freud first introduced his famous talking cure.

Some of the more volatile schools of analysis (Fritz Perls' gestalt therapy, Alexander Lowen's bioenergetic approach, Janov's primal scream) teach the desirability of giving vent to one's feelings through verbal or physical acts of aggression. Some of these therapies encourage patients to fantasize aggression (imagine yourself biting a piece of flesh out of someone's body). Others encourage more realistic behavior (beat on a pillow with a tennis racket while screaming "I hate you" or "I'll kill you"). Some of the therapists assume, as it is stated in early Freud, that there is a certain amount of natural aggression or energy that must be released. Others feel that anger builds up as a result of previous frustrating or painful experiences. In either case, a cathartic display of emotion is supposed to release any pent-up anger or aggression. Therapists who encourage this say eliminating bottled up feelings eliminates disturbing tensions and promotes deeper and more meaningful relationships with others. They say a person who learns to get things off his chest, overcome inhibitions and show emotions will become a healthier person.

There are indications, however, that the excessive violence and aggression evoked in these therapies may be doing more harm than good—to the therapist as well as to the patient. In July, for instance, a California Superior Court awarded \$170,000 in damages to a 22-year-old female patient who accused her therapist of poking, beating and torturing her during a marathon therapy session. The therapist called his technique "rage reduction," but three medical doctors who listened to tapes of the session concluded that the therapist had gone beyond the bounds of contemporary medical practice.

This is an extreme case but Leonard Berkowitz of the University of Wisconsin sees potential danger in therapy that encourages an unrestricted show of aggression. He explained his opposition to aggression in therapy in a paper presented at the recent meeting of the American Psychological Association. He admits that patients may feel better after such an experience because a ventilation of feelings sometimes extinguishes disturbing anxieties, gives a person insights into his effect on others and can teach a person to be generally more assertive. But, he says in the long run, the patient may be learning aggressive responses that are repeated and used outside of the therapeutic session.

Berkowitz's opinion stems from a growing body of experimental research on aggression. For instance, therapists and group members who encourage a patient to act aggressively also approve of the patient's verbal or physical acts of violence. The patient accepts the approval and learns that he will not be punished for his violent actions. Experiments in behavior theory, says Berkowitz, indicate that such reinforcement heightens the likelihood of aggression in other settings. He cites the work of Ross D. Parke and William Ewall of the University of Wisconsin and Ronald G. Slaby of the University of Washington. In the August *JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY* they report on an experiment in which subjects were verbally reinforced for selecting and speaking either aggressive, neutral or helpful words. On a subsequent test the subjects had an opportunity to electrically shock another individual. Those who had been reinforced for aggressive verbalization were more aggressive than those who had been reinforced for neutral or helpful words.

Onlookers are not the only source of reinforcement. Berkowitz explains that after an emotional release a person sometimes feels better because of a weakening of aggression-anxiety. This feeling of well-being becomes an immediate reward that tends to strengthen a broad spectrum of aggressive responses. Also, says Berkowitz, individuals who attack someone (even in a

fantasy) are frequently gratified at learning that their intended victim has been injured. The information that one's enemy has suffered might well be another reinforcement acting to strengthen habits.

With experimental evidence to support these theories, "We should go slow in urging people to express their aggressive desires," Berkowitz says. But there may be a less violent method of emotional release that contains the benefits but not the potentially harmful effects of aggression. When a person attacks someone, he explains, he is making aggressive responses that provide aggressive stimuli to himself and his listeners. These stimuli, in turn, can provoke further aggressive reactions. If that person merely describes his emotions (saying, for example, "I'm boiling mad"), his remarks constitute somewhat less of an attack upon the other and might be less likely to stimulate still more aggressive reactions.

Tentative results of a pilot study by Berkowitz and Mayra Buvinic seem to indicate this is a good possibility. Insulted women who could only describe their feelings to their insulter were subsequently less hostile to this person than were other insulted women who had been allowed to attack the insulter. The preceding aggression evidently furnished additional stimuli to continued aggression, says Berkowitz, but the statement of feelings was less apt to do so.

Berkowitz intends to revise and repeat the experiment but he feels that telling someone you are angry is more rational than striking out at that person. It can be informative and even beneficial. You let the other person know how he has affected you and this might cause that person to make amends or change his behavior. You give him cognitive feedback so that with better knowledge he is less likely to thwart or hurt you inadvertently again.

In conclusion, and after more than 10 years of research on aggression, Berkowitz says, "It is unintelligent to encourage people to be aggressive, even if, with the best of intentions, we want to keep this within the confines of psychotherapy." □