

Does Venting Your Feelings Actually Help?



By [Jill Suttie](#) | [Greater Good Magazine](#)

We all get upset from time to time—some of us more than others. Whether we're sad about the loss of a loved one, angry at friends or family, or fearful about the state of the world, it often feels good to let it all out.

That's because sharing our emotions [reduces our stress](#) while making us [feel closer](#) to others we share with and providing a sense of belonging. When we open up our inner selves and people respond with sympathy, we feel seen, understood, and supported.

But “sharing” covers a lot of different modes of communication. Are some healthier than others, over the long run? Science suggests that it depends, in part, on how you

share and how people respond to you. Expressing our emotions often to others may actually make us feel worse, especially if we don't find a way to gain some perspective on why we feel the way we do and take steps to soothe ourselves.

Why we vent

Our emotions are valuable sources of information, alerting us that something is wrong in our environment and needs our attention. Whether we need to confront someone who's abusing us, hide to avoid danger, or seek comfort from friends, feelings like anger, fear, and sadness help us prepare to meet the moment.

But if feelings are internal signals, why do we share them with others?

"We want to connect with other people who can help validate what we're going through, and venting really does a pretty good job at fulfilling that need," says researcher Ethan Kross, author of the book [Chatter](#). "It feels good to know there's someone there to rely on who cares enough to take time to listen."

Sharing our feelings also provides an opportunity to gain insight into what's causing our difficult feelings and avert future upsets. Sometimes, just verbalizing what's bothering us to another person helps to clarify the situation and name the emotions involved. Or, if we get caught in emotional whirlwinds, our confidants can provide new perspectives and offer sound advice, says Kross.

Unfortunately, this latter part of the equation often gets lost in the shuffle, he adds.

"When we get stuck in a venting session, it feels good at the moment, because we're connecting with other people," he says. "But if all we do is vent, we don't address our cognitive

needs, too. We aren't able to make sense of what we're experiencing, to make meaning of it."

So, while venting may be good for building supportive relationships and feel good at the moment, it's not enough to help us through. If others simply listen and empathize, they may inadvertently extend our emotional upset.

The dark side of venting

For many years, psychologists believed that dark emotions, like anger, needed to be released physically. This led to a movement to "let it all out," with psychologists literally telling people to hit soft objects, like pillows or punching bags, to release pent-up feelings.

It turns out, however, that this type of emotional venting likely doesn't soothe anger as much [as augment it](#). That's because encouraging people to act out their anger makes them relive it in their bodies, strengthening the neural pathways for anger and making it easier to get angry the next time around. [Studies](#) on venting anger (without effective feedback), whether [online](#) or [verbally](#), have also found it to be generally unhelpful.

The same is true of grief or anxiety following trauma. While we should of course seek support from those around us during difficult times of loss and pain, if we simply relive our experience without finding some way to soothe ourselves or find meaning, it could extend our suffering.

For some time, people who worked with trauma victims encouraged them to "debrief" afterward, having them talk through what happened to them to ward off post-traumatic stress. But a [randomized controlled study](#) found that this didn't help much, likely because debriefing doesn't help distance people from their trauma. Similarly, students who vented their anxiety after 9/11 [suffered from more anxiety](#) up

to four months later than those who didn't. As the study authors write, their "focus on and venting of emotions was found to be uniquely predictive of longer-term anxiety."

Venting through social media can do the same thing. In [one study](#), researchers surveyed students attending Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University after mass shootings occurred at each campus to see how venting their grief over social media helped them recover. While students thought that venting was beneficial, their post-traumatic stress and depression scores actually went up the more they vented.

Talking and listening with care

Besides making us feel worse, venting can also have a negative effect on our audience.

While supportive friends and family hopefully care enough to listen and sympathize with us, it can be frustrating to sit with someone who vents frequently when that person seems to be wallowing in emotion without learning from their experience. And being around someone stuck in anger, fear, or sadness cycles can be overwhelming for listeners who may end up "[catching](#)" the emotions themselves.

"Repeatedly venting over and over and over again, can create friction in social relationships," says Kross. "There's often a limit to how much listeners, your friends, can actually hear."

I know that I am guilty of wanting someone to listen to me when I'm upset—and not wanting advice right off the bat. If I'm in the midst of pain, trying to talk me out of my feelings or to offer pat solutions seems insensitive or even patronizing.

However, Kross doesn't advocate for that. Instead, he says, there's an art to being a listener. It takes a combination of

empathy or sympathy—and waiting for the right moment before offering perspective.

“People are going to differ, depending on what they’re dealing with, how intense their experiences are,” he says. “Being sensitive to the fact that some people may need more time before they’re ready to transition from venting to thinking is really important.”

Skillful venting

There is a healthier way to vent, Kross says. He suggests these guidelines:

Be selective about when you vent. There are lots of ways to deal with difficult emotions, and not all of them involve other people. Some people can gain perspective on their own, by writing their thoughts down or gaining distance from them through meditation. Kross recommends [changing your environment](#) to help you process emotions and tamp down rumination that might otherwise keep you stuck in an emotional whirlwind.

When you vent to others, prompt them to offer perspective. If you find yourself venting to someone without your emotions dissipating (or maybe getting worse), you may be caught in a cycle of “[co-rumination](#)”—a rehashing that can keep you stuck. To get out of that, you can ask the person to step back and help you reframe your experience by asking, “How should I think about this differently?” or “What should I do in this situation?” This will cue them to offer perspective and assure them that you’re looking for something more than a listening ear.

Consider to whom you vent. Before venting to someone, ask yourself, “Did this person really help me the last time I talked to them, or did they just make me feel worse?” If someone is there for you but doesn’t tend to broaden your

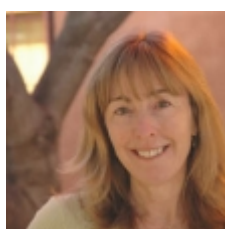
perspective, you may just get more stirred up emotionally. Being more deliberate about who you vent to could help you in the long run.

Be careful around online venting. While sharing our emotions online [can help us feel better](#) in the moment and identify supportive allies, results can be mixed. For one thing, negative emotions [easily spread online](#), which may create a herd mentality, resulting in bullying or trolling—especially if you identify a particular person as responsible for your feelings. While it's unclear if venting online is overall a good or bad thing, it may not help you gain the perspective you need to move forward.

Still, all in all, Kross says venting is a good thing, helping us cope. If we can get past the letting off steam part, we can feel better in the long run and keep our relationships strong, too.

“Venting serves some function,” he says. “It has benefits for the self in terms of satisfying our social and emotional needs. We just need to find out what the correct dosage is and make sure to offer to supplement that with cognitive reframing.”

About the Author



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