

The Best Revenge

Revenge: as a society, we kill for it. Though we often deny it, our society believes in a kinder, gentler version of “an eye for an eye.” When someone wrongs us, collectively or personally, we want revenge. You don’t have to go much beyond the widespread support of our government’s policies after 9/11 to see this. Even people who were adamantly opposed to a military solution harbored revenge fantasies. I admit that I got a charge out of the fantasy that we kidnap bin Laden and his crew, give them a sex change and send them back to live in Afghanistan as women. I found a sick sense of pleasure in the poetic justice involved in forcing those men to live by the horrific rules they and the Taliban had been forcing on women.

When we feel wronged at a personal level, our desire for revenge can be even more powerful. When I was eight, for example, I got in the habit of dipping my brother’s toothbrush in Comet whenever he did something mean. I thought I was pretty sly until he figured it out and beat me up. A friend of mine was sneakier. Whenever her sister had done something mean, she used her sister’s toothbrush to scrub the toilet bowl and then discreetly put it back for her sister to use. Unlike me, she never got caught.

As adults we don’t behave much better when we feel we’ve been wronged. This especially seems to be the case when a significant relationship falls apart. After a break-up, the temptation to destroy or confiscate joint property or property that belonged to the ex can sometimes feel overwhelming. An attorney I know once told me about a dejected partner who took a chainsaw to the couple’s hot tub to keep her ex-partner from being able to enjoy it.

The desire to shred an ex with words can also feel irresistible. When thinking about the ex, it’s almost impossible, at least at first, not to blame them and judge them mercilessly for what we now see as serious inadequacies. This is especially the case if the ex left us for someone else. Even if we only say these judgments silently in our heads, we get caught in the power of vindictive thinking. And usually, we don’t hold back. In those dark days after a break-up, most of us glory in telling anyone who will listen what a jerk our ex was and is. The scary thing is, we usually don’t even notice that we spent an entire conversation telling someone how messy, lazy, greedy, and emotionally immature our ex is until our listener points it out and asks us to change the subject.

The urge for revenge sometimes even leads us to engage in slander. I recently found out that one of my classmates actually went so far as to report his ex-partner to the licensure board for ethical violations out of spite. Fortunately, his ex was operating clearly within the ethical standards of the state and was cleared of the charges. Still, there is a permanent blotch on his record because he was reported.

In worse case scenarios, revenge translates into violence. When people who have been abused by their partners try to leave, their abusers often escalate the level of abuse. In some cases, abusers even kill their partners in retaliation. This is one reason that victims in abusive relationships find it so difficult to leave.

The catch is that revenge always comes with a cost. Obviously, if you chose to assault, stalk, harass your partner or damage their property, you might have to deal with the pains inflicted by the legal system on top of your grief and self pity. And even small things like leaving dog shit on your ex's doorstep or dusting their underwear with itching powder have psychic costs. The brief moments of exhilaration and glee are often followed by shame, guilt and the fear of being caught. The toxic residue left in the aftermath of revenge far outweighs the momentary glory. Plus, revenge damages relationships. No matter how much you hate your ex today, at some point you loved him or her, and any vindictive behavior will make it much less likely that they will ever accept you back into their circle of friends. And even if you don't want to ever see your ex again, it's likely that you will have to at some point, if only to pick up your unforwarded mail, deal with custody issues, or run into them somewhere. You also risk being seen as "bitter" by people in your community. This is a hard label to shake.

Ultimately, revenge is about trying to regain a sense of power and self-worth. You can do this in ways that don't involve revenge. First, if you are drawn to revenge, you are probably feeling like the other person has treated or is treating you pretty badly. When you feel like this, it's helpful to remember that anyone who would treat someone the way that person is treating you must be pretty miserable. Ironically, the fact that they are putting energy into doing hurtful things to you means that you have power over them, whether you chose to acknowledge it or not. You don't need to do anything to make them miserable. They're already there.

If that's not enough, you might try this visualization exercise. Imagine your ex as a hideous monster. Once you've got this image fixed in your mind, imagine blowing them up. I tend to imagine the person I'm angry at as a huge, purple dragon with bulging yellow eyes and green and orange moles that have thick ugly hairs sticking out of them. Once I have the image of the dragon firmly planted in my brain, I explode the moles off one by one, like fireworks on the 4th of July. When the moles are all gone, I explode the rest of the dragon. By the time the body has exploded into a big blob of dragon goo, I feel pretty good.

Even though we live in a culture that is obsessed with vengeance, it's important to recognize the futility of revenge. If you think about it, we never "caught" bin Laden. We didn't even get rid of the Taliban. In the absence of Western domination, they seem to be bouncing right back. We just wiped out a few buildings, including a hospital, and blew up a few mountains. The billions of dollars we spent on bombs and aircraft could have been used to finance education, feed hungry children, provide affordable housing to homeless families, and/or expand access to health care. Instead, we essentially gave that money to bin Laden. The same can be said for personal acts of revenge. No matter what someone does to you, the emotional, spiritual and social costs of revenge far outweigh any moments of glee. If you really want to get back at someone who has wronged you, put your energy into healing yourself and clearing them from your psychic space. Ultimately, living well is the best revenge.

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