Are violent video games bad for me? [1]

Dear Alice,

I've always loved video games, but I feel like there's a lot of stuff in the media saying that video games lead to violent or sociopathic personalities. Is there any evidence to suggest that violent video games are bad for emotional health?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You're right - there's no shortage of media buzz around this topic and it has been studied countless times, too. Simply put, there is no evidence to suggest that a person will commit violent acts solely based on their gaming habits. The effects of violent video games on emotional health, however, depend on a variety of factors including the game, the person, and the amount of time spent playing.

Studies do show a relationship between media consumption (such as playing video games and watching television and films) and aggressive behaviors. For example, one study found a link between violence desensitization (reduced responsiveness to actual violence based on exposure to violence in the media) and increased aggression in participants who were exposed to violent video games. Another study found that when sexual objectification and violence against women were part of the game, male participants experienced increased negative attitudes toward women. Separate research suggests a link between negative attitudes towards women and violence against women. With that said, becoming desensitized to violence or holding negative attitudes does not mean you'll become a violent sociopath. While these studies have found links between violent crimes and negative attitudes, there is no research to indicate that this leads to increased violence. In fact, violent crimes among young adults have been decreasing, despite the increase in sales of violent video games.

Another point to keep in mind is that research indicates that there isn't a big difference between the effects of violence in video games versus in television and movies. People can learn aggressive behaviors in different ways, so television and movies can play similar roles even though their consumption is more passive (watching versus controlling the characters and action). If you're worried about your own playing habits, it may be helpful to think of the amount, content, context, structure, and mechanics of the games you love to play. Are you playing for many hours each day or a few hours each week? Are you only playing violent
games or do you sometimes play other types? Are you playing single or multiplayer games? Is the game realistic or does it have 2D dimensional representations? How do you feel about your playing habits? Have you noticed any changes in yourself that could be associated with how long you play and what types of games you play? Thinking about each of these questions can help you understand the potential effects video games can have on your emotional health. You may also find it helpful to check out How many hours of gaming are too many? for more information about the effects of gaming.

If you only tend to play violent video games, you might also consider changing up the games you play every now and again. Some researchers have investigated how games featuring characters that help and support each other can actually increase pro-social behaviors. Some video games even help people get off the couch and get moving! That's pretty cool stuff. Given that all media has the potential to make people more aggressive, less sociable, less empathetic, and more desensitized to their external stimuli, it's worth being mindful of the media you consume and how it affects your mood. If you feel as though you play too much, and that it's hard to cut down, quit, or that it does emotionally affect you, it may be worth speaking to a mental health professional about your concerns.

Game on!

Alice!
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