

**Understanding the World's Deadliest
Addiction—and How to Overcome It**

THE SCIENCE

The bottom half of the book cover features a vibrant, abstract background composed of thick, wavy brushstrokes in shades of orange, yellow, and red, creating a sense of movement and intensity.

**OF
REVENGE**

James Kimmel, Jr., JD

THE SCIENCE OF REVENGE

Understanding the World's Deadliest
Addiction—and How to Overcome It

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*To the perpetrators,
for they were once the victims*

And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice*

INTRODUCTION

A REVENGE REVOLUTION

This book is about why we want to hurt the people who hurt us. Understanding this is a matter of life and death. Perhaps your life or the life of someone you love.

Revenge is the author of tragedy and the destroyer of peace and happiness. It's the root motivation behind most forms of human aggression and violence, including intimate partner violence, youth violence and bullying, street and gang violence, mass shootings, riots, police brutality, arson, violent extremism, terrorism, genocide, and war.^[1] Revenge destroys individuals, families, romantic relationships, fortunes, communities, nations, and empires. Yet we *want* revenge when we've been physically or emotionally harmed. This is of increasing concern in an age of powerful social networking platforms that make it easy and light speed fast to offend and enrage millions of people simultaneously, creating millions of people wanting revenge for the same thing at the same time.

But consider how odd this all is. We could want anything when somebody hurts or offends us. We could want cotton candy or potato chips, for example, or a nice massage or a relaxing nap. We could want a hug, a walk in a park, or to be surrounded by a litter of puppies. We could want a new pair of shoes, a tropical vacation, or a trove of diamonds. But what humans want most of all when we've been hurt is for the people who hurt us to feel pain—and for those people to understand that their pain is because of what they've done to us.^[2]

Yet there's no material gain in this. You can't put another person's pain in your stomach, in your bank account, or on your feet. In economic terms, a

single potato chip is more valuable, and a hug or a walk in a park more enjoyable. And who wouldn't rather spend time in the company of puppies? Revenge also comes with enormous risks and costs. Our retaliation against others often leads to equal or greater retaliation against us. And after exacting revenge, we're often left feeling worse but wanting more with continued thinking about the perpetrator and the harm and unwanted feelings of anger, anxiety, guilt, shame, and distress.^[3] So why, after we've been hurt, among the many wonderful things in this wide world of ours, would we want something as worthless, unpleasant, and costly as the suffering of another human being?

Surprisingly, given what's at stake, scientists until recently have devoted little attention to revenge, leaving it to poets, playwrights, and prophets to explain the demon inside us.^[4] The desire for revenge has been observed in virtually all traditional and contemporary societies around the world.^[5] It's experienced by human and nonhuman primates, and children as young as toddlers.^[6] Evolutionary psychologists believe the desire for revenge might have evolved as early as the Pleistocene epoch (the Ice Age) more than eleven thousand years ago.^[7] Some researchers contend that revenge is so firmly hardwired into our brains that we'd have better luck trying to change the world itself than stopping people from wanting it.^[8]

But what if the desire for revenge is both part of our genetic endowment and a neuroplastic brain-biological process, meaning that it's the product of changes taking place inside our brains in response to internal and external events and, therefore, subject to human volition and mastery? What if we could put this brain-biological process under a microscope, as we do with other conditions that produce human suffering, learn how and why it works, and develop strategies to help us control or even stop wanting revenge when other people hurt us?

To be clear, I'm not talking about *self-defense*. That's the necessary, lifesaving instinct we all possess to protect ourselves and others, even with lethal force, when faced with an imminent threat of serious bodily injury or death. We need this instinct to survive. I'm also not talking about sociopaths

or psychopaths who have abnormal brain structures, lack empathy, and represent less than 4 percent of the human population.^[9] Most murderers are not psychopaths or sociopaths; they're otherwise normal people who, because of a grievance of some sort, make a fateful decision to kill.^[10] That's the group I'm talking about in this book: the rest of us who, at times, feel we've been mistreated and want revenge for wrongs of the past—minutes, weeks, months, or even years in the past when the threat of imminent harm no longer exists.^[11] Ruminating on the hurts and traumas lurking in our memories is what activates the revenge desires that transform victims into perpetrators.^[12] The benefits of scientifically understanding and controlling this process would be incalculable. Reduce the desire for revenge in yourself and others and you'll reduce the level of suffering and violence in your personal life and the world around you.

A REVENGE REVOLUTION

This book tells the exciting, untold story behind recent scientific discoveries leading us toward a revenge revolution. And the key is in the *wanting*. Law enforcement, public health, and behavioral studies from around the world confirm that people who hurt or kill other people are almost always acting in accord with a personal grievance—a real or imagined perception of having been wronged, betrayed, shamed, humiliated, or victimized in the past.^[13] Recent neuroscience studies of what's happening inside the brains of people with grievances have led to a chilling discovery: activation of the reward and craving neurocircuitry of *addiction*.^[14]

It turns out that your brain on revenge looks like your brain on drugs. Grievances cue the brain to crave revenge in much the same way that stress and anxiety, or seeing drug paraphernalia or places of drug use, cue the brains of addicts to crave narcotics. Addiction scientists describe this cue-dependent learning as part of the brain's self-regulating opponent-process

system of maintaining balance between pleasure (well-being) and pain (stress), mediated in part by release of the neurotransmitter dopamine.^[15]

Being harmed or treated unfairly, or experiencing anger, disgust, guilt, or shame, is painful and activates the brain's neural "pain network"—specifically, a brain structure called the anterior insula.^[16] Getting revenge, or even just fantasizing about it, is rewarding, releasing dopamine and activating the brain's pleasure and reward circuitry, which primarily comprises the nucleus accumbens, the dorsal striatum, and the ventral tegmental area.^[17] This produces feelings of pleasure that temporarily cover up the pain, restoring balance.^[18] *For a while*. Like drugs and alcohol, the effects wear off quickly and almost always lead to more pain and suffering. But the reward circuitry of the brain is all about gratification *now*, not consequences later.^[19] That's up to the brain's prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for cognitive control, self-regulation, and executive function.^[20] With addiction, prefrontal control processes are hijacked, and reward circuitry runs amok.^[21] When revenge cravings become compulsive and can't be controlled despite the negative consequences, they take on the features of addiction.^[22]

Although scientists haven't thought of revenge as an addictive process until recently,^[23] poets, playwrights, and prophets have been trying to tell us this for thousands of years. Writing in 700 BCE, Homer warns of the dangers of compulsive revenge seeking in the *Odyssey*, telling the tale of King Odysseus, who, upon returning home from the Trojan War, finds his wife, Penelope, in the company of more than a hundred suitors and slaughters them all in an orgy of retaliation, unleashing a cycle of revenge that can be stopped only with the intervention of the gods.^[24] In the fifth century BCE, the ancient Greek playwrights Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides achieved immortal fame through tragic plays like *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Agamemnon*, and *Medea*, exhorting audiences about the dangers of compulsive revenge seeking. The book of Genesis, oldest of the Hebrew Bible and believed to have been written by the prophet Moses, cautions humanity about the dangers of compulsive revenge seeking in its archetypal stories of

Cain's vengeance killing of his brother, Abel, and God's vengeance-fueled mass slaughter of humanity during the Flood.

We've all experienced the desire to punish people who violate social norms or mistreat us. Most of us control these urges, perhaps briefly fantasizing about the deliciously terrible things we'd like to do before shutting down our hedonic desires and moving on with our lives, leaving the pain of the past where it belongs, in the past.^[25] But not everyone is so successful, not all grievances are the same or experienced in the same way, and we're not always able to control our revenge cravings. Human history is filled with horrifying examples of compulsive revenge seeking, from cruel acts of interpersonal violence to revenge-driven tribal, communal, and nation-sized conflicts, rebellions, revolts, insurrections, civil wars, and world wars leaving millions dead.

Revenge addicts come in many forms, not all or even most of them violent. Revenge addicts may be wounded kids compulsively firing off mean texts and equally wounded kids firing back. They may be obsessed sports fans thirsting for retaliation against opposing teams, obsessed moviegoers cheering on the superhero to vanquish the villain, and obsessed gamers slaughtering enemies in first-person shooter games. Revenge addicts may be offended lovers demeaning and assaulting each other, politicians taunting and disparaging each other, pissed-off neighbors dumping grass clippings on each other's lawns, road ragers cutting off inconsiderate drivers, customers berating inattentive waiters, and angry employees sabotaging workplaces. Revenge addicts can be anyone: grandmas, grandpas, friends, frenemies, cops, robbers, prosecutors, judges, wardens, guards, prisoners, soldiers, voters, clergy, the faithful, the faithless, nurses, doctors, patients, accountants, brokers, cafeteria ladies, artists, musicians, liberals, conservatives, fascists, communists, racists, extremists, minorities, majorities...the list goes on. The point is that, under the right circumstances, almost *anyone* can experience powerful revenge cravings. When the cravings are so strong that they can't be controlled despite the negative consequences of indulging them, they can transform perfectly normal, peaceful people into

perpetrators of unexpected and unimaginable acts of psychological and physical violence. The common denominator of those who commit acts of violence isn't that they're deranged or evil. It's their perception, real or imagined, that they've been wronged or victimized. All of them are in pain, and all of them want the one thing that their brains tell them will make the pain go away—the suffering of those who hurt them (or their proxies). It's a matter of brain biology.

This book takes a deep dive into the startling new neuroscience of revenge that's helping make sense of the seemingly senseless acts of cruelty and violence that humans inflict upon each other. Because revenge is ancient, universal, and bound up in so many human behaviors, relationships, values, and institutions, we'll also make excursions into human history, law, psychology, philosophy, politics, and religion. Along the way, we'll talk to leading researchers making breakthroughs in revenge neuroscience; a convicted murderer who has committed his life to helping others overcome revenge addiction from his jail cell; a former white supremacist who has devoted his life to helping violent extremists overcome their revenge addictions and return to lives of peace; a media mogul who acknowledges the entertainment industry's reliance on revenge cravings to sell tickets; a world-respected psychiatrist who believes, like me, that Donald Trump's long history of uncontrolled vengeful behavior suggests he's suffering from revenge addiction; the father of a murdered child who did the unthinkable and forgave the killers; and an inspirational leader of former gang members who risk their lives to stop retaliatory violence in city neighborhoods. We'll also hear from some of the most terrifying people of modern times—mass killers and tyrants who, in their manifestos, histories, interviews, and speeches, describe their descent into revenge addiction, leaving us with clear and dire warnings that we ignore at our peril.

Most important, we'll focus in this book on how understanding revenge as an addictive process can help individuals and communities control the desire to hurt the people who hurt us and protect ourselves and those we love from harm. We'll learn that there's a courtroom inside every human

mind where we try, convict, sentence, and punish the people who wrong us and where, at the conclusion of these trials, we choose whether to carry out the punishments in flesh and blood, in the here and now. We'll learn how our addictive brain biology turns these trials into kangaroo courts, but also how we can regain control by adapting and expanding strategies that have been successful in preventing and treating other addictive behaviors. And because forgiveness is the opposite of revenge and plays an important role in recovery from all addictions, we'll look at the remarkable neuroscience of forgiveness and the powerful role it plays in recovering from trauma, reducing pain, stopping dangerous revenge cravings, and restoring peace and happiness in our personal lives and even among nations.

Before we get to all that, however, I have a confession to make. I'm a recovering revenge addict. Let me tell you my story of how I went from being a normal teenager with no history of violence to coming within seconds of committing a revenge-fueled mass shooting—then on to becoming a revenge-dealing lawyer on the verge of suicide before becoming a revenge and violence researcher at the Yale School of Medicine on a quest to prove the existence of, and find a cure for, the deadliest addiction no one has ever heard of.

CONFESSIONS OF A REVENGE ADDICT

I grew up on a small farm in central Pennsylvania, but my folks weren't real farmers. We had a few Black Angus cattle and some pigs and chickens, but my father was an insurance agent and my mother a homemaker, so we didn't make our living from the land. This became a source of contempt from the neighboring farm kids whose fathers were real farmers. My dad rolled out of bed around 9:00 a.m. and into his office in town by 10:00 wearing shiny shoes and a suit. Their dads were up by 4:00 a.m. and in their milking parlors by 5:00 wearing filthy boots and overalls covered in manure.

I did everything I could to win them over. I enrolled in vo-ag classes, joined Future Farmers of America, listened to country music, and wore the same style of western jeans, trucker boots, and “IH” International Harvester hats they did. They weren’t buying. There were many farm kids and only one of me. They started bullying me, at first verbally and then physically. This continued through junior and senior high schools. The hunting grounds were the bus, the locker room, and the hallways between classes. There were no anti-bullying programs in the early 1980s, at least not in my school. When you were outmuscled and outnumbered, you learned to leap over tripping feet and duck beneath swinging fists.

Late one night, when I was about seventeen, my parents, brother, and I awoke to the sound of a gunshot. We jumped out of bed and raced to the windows. I recognized the pickup truck speeding away. It belonged to one of the kids who had been harassing me. We checked around the house, didn’t see any damage, and went back to sleep.

Before school each morning, my job was to go out to the barn and feed the cows, the hogs, and our hunting dog, an adorable little beagle named Paula. While making my rounds that morning, I found Paula in her pen, lying in a pool of blood with a bullet hole in her head.

Yeah, lots of emotions there. Lots of pain and rage. Why would they kill an innocent dog? Because we weren’t real farmers? Because I was thriving despite their abuse? I’d never done a thing to them. We reported it to the state police. Again, this was rural Pennsylvania in the early 1980s. The police did nothing. And my father, who made a living in part by selling insurance to farmers, and who expected me to take care of my business, did nothing. How was I supposed to take care of my business? Well, I had a grievance. Evolution fills in the rest.

About two weeks later, I was home alone late at night and heard a vehicle come to a stop in front of our house again. Moments later, there was a flash and an explosion. I ran to the window. They blew up our mailbox. The same pickup truck roared out of the cloud of smoke. The blast not only launched our mangled mailbox into the cornfield, but it detonated what was left of my

self-control. I wanted revenge. *Bad.* Living in the country and being hunters, we had plenty of guns. I grabbed a loaded revolver from my father's nightstand, jumped in my mother's car, and tore off into the night, shouting and cussing at the top of my lungs with tears of rage streaming down my face.

I eventually cornered them against a barn on one of their farms. There were three or four of them. They climbed out of the truck and squinted back into my headlights, trying to see who had just barreled down the long gravel drive kicking up rocks and dust. It had taken some time for me to catch up to them. I had never confronted them before. Since it was my mother's car, they might have thought it was her. What was clear is that they were confused. And unarmed. And they didn't know I had a gun.

It would be so easy and feel so good...

I grabbed the gun from the passenger seat and started to open the door.

And then I had a sort of sudden insight. I somehow glimpsed into my future and saw that if I killed them, I'd be killing a part of myself—maybe all of it. I remembered that I was a good person raised by good people, and I didn't really want to become a murderer. I just wanted the pain to stop. I had something to live for—maybe the dignity and self-respect I thought they'd taken from me. In that moment, I realized that the cost of getting the revenge I craved was more than I was willing to pay. And that was just enough to cause me to shut the door, put the gun back down on the passenger seat, and drive home. Terrified. I'd come within seconds of committing a mass shooting.

It felt cowardly, not going through with it. As if I didn't have the guts. As if I didn't take care of my business and failed the code imprinted in the DNA of humanity to make others pay when they hurt you. I got over it after a while. And for some reason I can't quite explain, those guys whom I let live that night stopped bothering me. Maybe it was a wake-up call for them too.

Any addict can tell you there's a big difference between controlling your cravings once and mastering them over a long period of time. That night, I controlled my craving for revenge, but I was nowhere near mastering it.

Quite the opposite, the craving was only starting to grow. There are lots of reasons to feel offended and mistreated in this world, and lots of people whose suffering can help make you feel better. I had acquired a taste for revenge. The way I saw it, I just needed to figure out a way to get it without overpaying.

That's when I came upon the idea of going into the professional revenge business. Instead of becoming a mass murderer, I decided to become a lawyer. See, lawyers get revenge without paying for it. In fact, they get paid, *a lot*, for selling revenge to the masses. And I'm talking about the high-quality, pharmaceutical-grade, government-approved, manufactured-inside-a-courtroom type of revenge, better known by the brand name "Justice," with no strings attached and no criminal record. Legalized revenge. Lawyers are the only people in our society licensed to prescribe, manufacture, and sell revenge. It seemed like a deal too good to pass up.

While attending law school at the University of Pennsylvania, I did an internship in the Philadelphia district attorney's office and got my first taste of punishing people for hire by prosecuting and locking away violent and nonviolent criminals. This felt very good. After graduating from law school, I served as a law clerk to a federal judge, and we spent time sentencing felons to tough federal prison terms. This also felt very good. For a while. I sometimes experienced brief moments of sorrow and remorse watching defendants being led away in handcuffs, but I brushed it off. I gave serious consideration to becoming a full-time prosecutor, but their salaries are low. I had lots of student loans and needed to make money fast. So, I joined a large Philadelphia law firm as a civil litigator and started dealing justice to my clients by the leather briefcase full. I was making bank and snorting all the revenge I wanted for free, or so I thought.

Within a decade, my revenge addiction had nearly destroyed me and my family. By the time I bottomed out, I'd become a maniacal bully like the guys who killed my dog. I threatened retribution against just about anyone for the slightest offense—including my wife and kids. No grievance was too small to merit a retaliatory swipe. Each hit of revenge ("justice") made me feel as if I

were on top of the world, followed by an inevitable crash and the need for more. A hammer can't drive a nail without experiencing the impact of the blow, and I was feeling as much pain as I was delivering.

I began to hate what I did for a living and who I'd become. But revenge was my easy fix, the edge that took the edge off until I was hurting again. I descended into a professional and psychological crisis. By this point, I'd quit several law firms, converting a lucrative income into virtually no income at all. I fell into depression and found myself sitting alone in a spare bedroom contemplating suicide. That's when I began to wonder whether I was addicted—when I started craving revenge against *myself*. Fortunately, the cost of exacting that revenge was also more than I was willing to pay.

They say the first step in recovery is admitting you have a problem. I knew I had a huge problem. My thirst for revenge nearly killed me twice. But unlike alcohol, narcotics, and gambling, there are no rehabs or 12-step programs for revenge addicts. I didn't even know for sure whether I was hooked. I just knew that it felt like an uncontrollable obsession, and that a lot of people around me seemed to be obsessed too. This included many of the clients who hired me, opposing lawyers getting high from trading blows with me, and other perfectly normal, average people throughout society doing terrible things like abusing and shooting each other to fulfill some need to hurt the people who hurt them.

I realized that if I was going to be saved, I'd have to do it myself. I'm a spiritual person, so I started there, like many people who struggle with addiction. I studied the revenge and forgiveness teachings of the world's major religions and found them to be in conflict, with nearly as many religions, and sects within religions, encouraging revenge as discouraging it. My first book, *Suing for Peace*, published in 2005, recounts this spiritual-legal journey.^[26] It also contains my early hypothesizing about revenge addiction and my "12-step program" for recovery called The Nonjustice System (NJS)—a virtual courtroom role play where you safely release and overcome your revenge cravings by putting the people who harm you on trial while playing all the roles yourself: victim, prosecutor, defendant, judge,