

# Dangers of Rejection

Documentary film shines light on the effects of social ostracism

**SESSION** “REJECT” Documentary Film and Discussion Session: Social Ostracism — Effects and Coping Strategies | **Presenters** Purdue University: Dr. Kipling Williams, professor of psychological sciences; Golden Rule Films: Ruth Thomas-Suh, director; Performance Services, Inc.: Scott Zigmond, vice president of sales and marketing

**D**r. Kipling Williams, a professor of psychological sciences at Purdue University, said the need to be accepted and to be part of a group is something that is in our DNA. Our early ancestors were more likely to survive if they worked together in groups. Those who couldn’t work with others or who were cast out were less likely to survive. Today, social ostracism can be just as dangerous and powerful.

“As soon as we experience ostracism, we experience pain,” Williams said. “I’m not talking about metaphorical pain; I’m talking about actual, physical pain as we know it.”

Ostracism and its effects are the subject of the documentary film *REJECT*, which was screened for the first time in Wisconsin at the State Education Convention. Following this powerful film, Williams led a discussion on the effects of social ostracism and strategies to cope with it.

In his research, Williams was surprised to find how powerful ostracism is and how simple it can be to make people feel accepted.

Using a series of basic yet powerful experiments, Williams constructed scenarios in which subjects weren’t included in a small group. In one experiment, Williams had three people sit in a room and

toss a ball back and forth. Two of the people were instructed to stop tossing the ball to the third person at some point during the experiment. Williams said the effect on the third subject was always the same — dejection and sadness. Once the experiment was over, Williams tested the subjects to see what state of mind they were in. He found that those who were ostracized were more likely to follow rules or orders and they were more likely to agree with people or a group even if it was obvious those people were wrong.

In these simple experiments, Williams said it was sometimes hard to watch the subjects being put through the tests. The subjects weren’t being bullied or harmed; they were simply being cut off or rejected from a small group. To that point, Williams said studies have found that among children, ostracism or neglect has more negative, long-lasting effects than bullying.

In another experiment, Williams had a student walk on campus and nod or acknowledge passing students. Those students were then surveyed at that moment to find out how they felt. Similarly, Williams ran this same experiment but had the control student look through or not acknowledge passing students. The results



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overwhelmingly showed that those students who were acknowledged were in a better mood.

“This is how easy it is to make someone feel good,” Williams said.

Williams shared a note that a fellow professor received one day from a student he barely knew. In the note, the student explained that she had been going through a rough time. She had lost a close family member and felt disconnected at college. The student said she was planning on attempting to take her own life but then the professor said ‘Hi’ and asked her how she was doing. The student said this conversation was enough to make her change her mind.

“It just takes one person to make a difference,” Williams said. “You don’t have to get everyone on board, you can reach out and change people’s lives.” ■