

# The DRAM, Vol.14(6) - Treating anger in alcohol use disorder

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Imagine someone bumps into you on the street. There are at least two ways to interpret this behavior: the person was simply being careless, or the person was being hostile toward you. If you consistently make hostile attributions, [you'd probably feel](#) a lot of anger and might even turn to substances to cope with your anger. Indeed, many people who experience alcohol use disorder (AUD) also experience [greater levels](#) of [trait](#) anger. This week, The DRAM reviews a study by [Jesse Cougle](#) and his colleagues that investigates whether an online program can reduce hostile [attribution](#) bias in people with AUD who also have elevated levels of anger, and if reducing this bias reduces drinking behavior.

## What was the research question?

Does a hostile interpretation bias modification training reduce trait anger and drinking behavior in individuals with AUD and elevated trait anger?

## What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 348 people from the internet and their local community to participate in the study. Fifty-eight individuals who qualified for a diagnosis of moderate AUD, had elevated trait anger, and had regular internet access agreed to take part in the study. They completed a preliminary survey that included items about their drinking habits and hostile attribution bias. Participants were randomly assigned to complete either the hostile interpretation bias modification training or watch a series of videos about healthy habits (a control condition). In the training program, participants imagine themselves in a prompted ambiguous situation, and respond in a number of ways to a non-hostile interpretation offered for the situation (see Figure). Fifty-four participants completed the survey again after the four-week program, and then completed the survey again one month later. The researchers then used a [latent growth curve model](#) to examine the data for treatment effects over multiple timepoints.

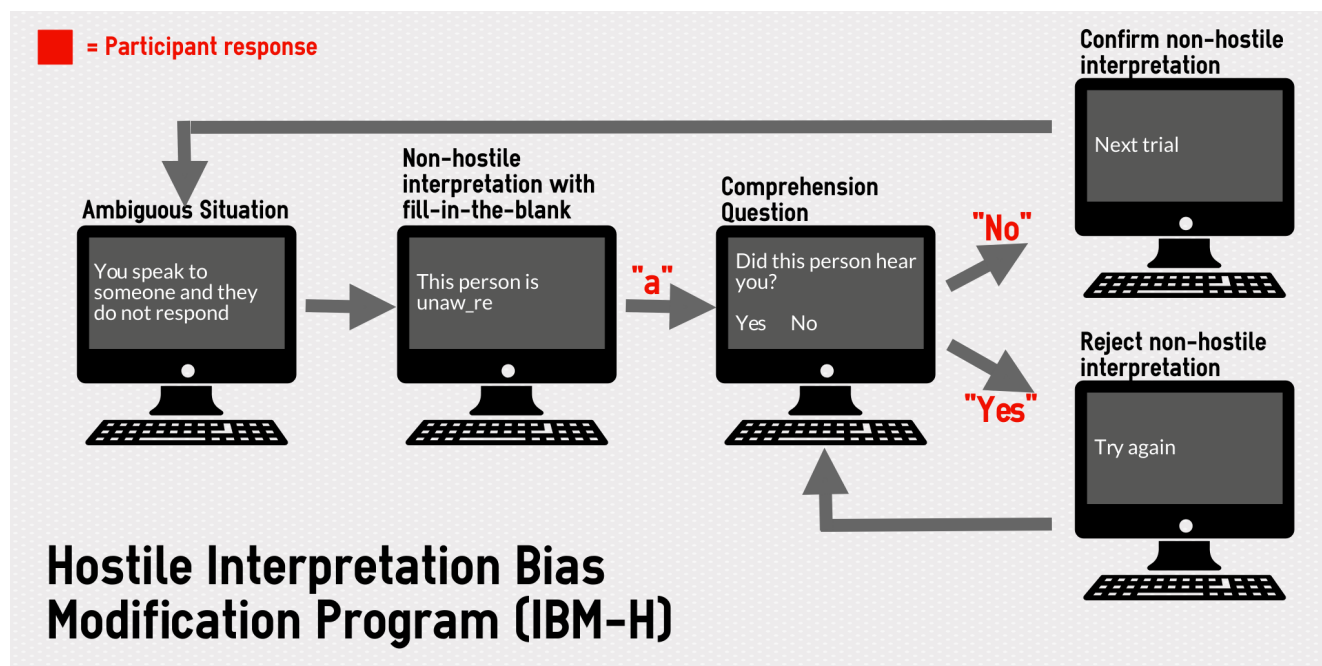


Figure. An example of one trial of the non-hostile interpretation training is represented above. Each training session consists of 64 trials. Participants completed 8 sessions of the program over the course of four weeks. Adapted from Cogle et al., 2017. Click image to enlarge.

### What did they find?

The people who underwent the non-hostile interpretation training [significantly](#) reduced their hostile attribution bias compared to the control group. Changes in attribution bias also [mediated](#) a reduction in trait anger for those in the training program. Experiencing a reduction in trait anger and expressions of anger was associated with a reduction in drinking to cope with anger. However, while both groups reduced their alcohol consumption at follow-up, there was no difference in reduction of alcohol consumption between the two groups.

### Why do these findings matter?

For people who have problems with both AUD and elevated anger, having tools to treat anger-related issues in conjunction with alcohol use treatment may be helpful, given that people might [drink to cope](#) with negative feelings, including anger. These findings indicate that non-hostile interpretation training might be a promising brief, non-confrontational, and easily-administered program that could reduce anger-related symptoms, though more research is needed to see if this intervention could be modified or combined with other treatment to have an impact on alcohol consumption.

## **Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?**

Only 58 people participated in the current study. Repeating the study with a larger participant pool would allow us to better understand if and how the training program changes drinking. The follow-up period in this study was only one month, so we cannot know whether reductions in hostile interpretation bias or trait anger will last over a longer period of time.

### **For more information:**

If you are concerned about how drinking is impacting your life, [Your First Step to Change](#) is a free, anonymous resource designed to help you evaluate your behavior and decide whether and how to change it.

— Rhiannon Chou Wiley

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