FIGURE 13.10
Elevations in Systolic Blood Pressure as a Function of Provocation and the Opportunity to Aggress

Provocation increased blood pressure only when participants were not given an opportunity to directly aggress against someone who provoked them. These data support the claim that direct aggression produces a cathartic release of tension.

Source: Hokanson and Burgess (1962).

an aggressive picture. Finally, blood pressure readings were taken to determine how upset and aroused participants were feeling.

Figure 13.10 shows some of the results from this investigation. First, notice that in the absence of any provocation, none of the conditions had much of an effect. The situation was different following provocation, however. Here, participants given the chance to verbally or physically aggress were less physiologically upset than were those who were not given the opportunity to release their aggression. In fact, they were as relaxed as those who had never been provoked at all. These findings support the claim that direct aggression produces a cathartic release of tension.

Unfortunately, direct aggression also has some substantial costs. Lashing out against a person who has provoked us can offer a short-term release of aggressive impulses, but the long-term effects are far less positive. As we noted when discussing the effects of corporal punishment, violence begets violence. If we aggress against a person and suffer no negative consequences, we are more apt to aggress against that person in the future. Moreover, we risk becoming embroiled in a more severe situation if the person retaliates. For all of these reasons, direct aggression is an ineffective way to deal with anger and aggressive impulses.

2. Substitute Aggression

In many situations, we are prohibited from aggressing against someone who has provoked us. If our boss criticizes our work, we can’t very well respond by hitting him or her or by spewing expletives. In situations like these, people may turn to substitute forms of aggression that offer an indirect form of catharsis.

Displacement is one such behavior. Displacement occurs when we release aggressive drive by aggressing against a person who is not the source of our anger. For example, if you yell at your roommate when you’re really mad at your boyfriend or girlfriend, you are exhibiting displacement. There is considerable evidence that people use displacement to release aggressive impulses and that doing so temporarily alleviates aggressive urges (Marcus-Newhall, Pederson, Carlson, & Miller, 2000; N. Miller,