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The Prisoner's Dilemma

Games are recreational activities which simulate real situations in a physically and psychologically nonthreatening manner.

The Prisoner's Dilemma is a hypothetical situation which game theorists, strategists and mathematicians employ as a model for many situations challenging contemporary society. It is a riddle in which two people are imprisoned and charged with an offense without sufficient evidence to convict either one. Each is separated from the other and offered leniency if one incriminates the other. If both confess, they will receive a lesser punishment.

In view of this premise, what is the best strategy? To hold out, adhere to principle, trust and accept risk and therefore not confess or incriminate the other, and perhaps ultimately achieve relief. The alternate strategy involves responding to the risk that the other prisoner might incriminate you to gain approval and a degree of relief; therefore, you choose to sacrifice the other prisoner before you are betrayed. Of course, if the other prisoner feels the same way, there is a race to betray one another. In this latter scenario, one of the two is certainly sacrificed. At best, both confess and are imprisoned for a lesser term.

By contrast, if each is faithful to the other, neither confesses, no one is incriminated; both preserve the chance of being released (both win). Seems like a better strategy, does it not? But what if the other prisoner does not use the same logic? Thus, the prisoner's dilemma!

Each time I think about the problem, the best choice always seems to be that the prisoners should not betray one another. But what is the other prisoner thinking?

Stanley J. Goldsmith, MD, Editor-in-Chief
The Journal of Nuclear Medicine