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# Act now to defy 'bystander effect'

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**CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER**

The man huddled underneath his tattered blanket as tightly as he could, but still shivered from the cold. The cardboard box that he sat on was damp from being placed on the snow, and his scruffy beard made him look old and worn.

He couldn't have been more than 30.

Amid the hustle and bustle of downtown, this man stood out. We were young and from the suburbs, so homeless people were a rare sight for us. Standing there, we watched as most people ignored him. Despite having to walk right past his slouched body, they pretended he wasn't there.

But our mother stopped.

She took us by the hand and approached him with a smile. "Hello, how are you?" she said. With a tone of compassion, she asked what his name was and if he had been able to find a shelter the night before. The exchange lasted only a few minutes, then she handed him a dollar and we were off.

RENE JOHNSTON/TORONTO STAR FILE
A homeless man named Eugene sits at Bay and Richmond streets as people go about their regular routine in this January, 2007 file image.

As kids, we used to think she was just doing this to be nice to him. Only years later did we really understand that she was also trying to teach us a lesson. She wanted to show us the importance of acknowledging the humanity in everyone.

It's a lesson we were reminded of recently when out-of-town relatives came to visit and were shocked by the number of people sleeping on the streets. We realized then that we had become accustomed to seeing them there. Now living in the big city ourselves, we too were guilty of walking by.

Psychologists call this the bystander effect. They say that a person is less likely to assist someone in need when other people are around. Ironically, the more witnesses there are, the less likely it is one will lend a hand.

That's because most people assume someone else will step up and take responsibility, so they don't have to. And research shows that, in an emergency, most people will wait to see what others do before offering to help.

"When an ambiguous event occurs, an individual bystander will be considerably influenced by the ways in which other bystanders are reacting," writes John Darley, a psychology professor at Princeton University and authority on the bystander effect.

This causes a kind of "pluralistic ignorance," he says, because everyone waits for someone else to take action yet no one is willing to step forward first.

The term "bystander effect" was first coined around the time of the Holocaust, when people all across Europe stood by and watched as Jewish neighbours and friends were being led to their death.

While some people were afraid for their own safety, others assumed it was someone else's responsibility to intervene, says Jonathan White, assistant professor of sociology at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts, and expert on genocide studies.

"Some utilized a variety of defence mechanisms such as denial and rationalization to psychologically trick themselves into not having to take any responsibility for what was going on," he explains.

Those same mechanisms are still common in today's society. Three years ago a Toronto bus driver was dragged onto the street and beaten by an angry passenger while his 8-year-old son watched in horror. There were 20 passengers on the bus at the time, but no one intervened. Instead, they all fled before the police could interview them.

The bystander effect is also at play when we flip through the newspaper and ignore stories of injustice, see an elderly woman on the subway and refuse to give up our seat, or distance ourselves from pain and suffering overseas by concluding that "they" are not like "us."

A few years ago we attended an international symposium established to discuss the greatest threats to our world. What emerged was not a consensus that we are most threatened by terrorism or weapons of mass destruction but, as the Dalai Lama put it, by "a generation of passive bystanders."

Being a bystander is something we've all done.

Of course, there are many examples of people who do reach out. But in a world where we are encouraged to "look out for Number 1" and helping a stranger is considered "above and beyond," their actions are no longer expected of everyone.

"Helping people is slowly disintegrating in our world," says Professor White. "Many people simply don't want to have the weight of the responsibility for other people's pain firmly upon their shoulders."

Walking along the same downtown streets years later, we were reminded of our mother's message to us during those childhood trips to the big city: We all have a responsibility to one another. Sure, it could mean an added weight for us, but as with any weight, the more people you have to share it, the lighter it becomes.

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