The Bystander Effect: A Case Study By Karen Sternheimer

You might have seen video of bystanders rushing to lift a burning car off of a motorcyclist who was trapped underneath. Commentators praised the bystanders as good Samaritans for risking their own lives to help. As you can see in the video below, the rescuers clearly needed help to tip the car, and one by one the bystanders saw that there was a role for them to play in the rescue.

I had a similar experience recently—although not nearly as dramatic. While taking a morning walk, I noticed an elderly woman walking on the sidewalk coming towards me. I frequently passed her on Sunday mornings and recognized her right away; she always wore a coat and gloves, no matter the weather. She also never made eye contact, seeming to be in her own world.

Our worlds would intersect when I saw her fall down, not 50 feet in front of me. As I walked towards her, I noticed that she wasn’t getting up.

“Are you okay?” I asked her, kind of knowing the answer was no.

“I don’t know what happened,” she said, “I’ve never fallen down before.”

“It happens to the best of us,” I assured her.

I offered her a hand, but she seemed to be in too much pain to get up. I didn’t have my phone with me, but knew I needed to call for help.

“Do you have a phone?” I asked her, noticing she had a tiny black purse, one that might barely fit a phone. She didn’t answer me, and even seemed a little confused.

“Is there someone I should call for you?” I asked again, and she said she had a son, but was unsure what his number was.

“I’m on my way to church,” she told me. “Maybe the people on the corner can give me a ride.”

I wasn’t sure which corner she meant, and told her that I wasn’t going to leave her there on the sidewalk alone. Just then some joggers came by.

“Do either of you have a phone?” I asked. “This lady fell and we need to call for help.” A woman walking her dog approached with a phone and called 911. The operator told her that an ambulance would arrive soon—the fire department was less than a mile away—and that we should not try and move the injured woman.

Hearing our conversation, a man and woman who lived in the nearby house came out. The woman said she knew the lady lived around the corner by herself, but didn’t know her name. This lady was very independent, she said, and apparently preferred to keep to herself. The man offered to go inside and get a pillow for her to make her more comfortable.

“If I could only get back to my house I’ll be fine,” the lady said, struggling to get up.

“Don’t try to get up just yet,” I suggested, “you don’t want to hurt yourself again.” I noticed her breathing was heavy and thought that she should definitely wait for medical attention.

The two joggers helped pull her up to her feet, something I was reluctant to do, and helped walk her back home.

“If she were my relative I would want the paramedics to at least check her out,” I said to the dog walker, as they walked away. But she wasn’t, and there was nothing more I could do. I hoped that she would get medical attention soon, and that one of the neighbors who helped her home would check on her later.

This incident and the motorcycle accident remind me of the famous field experiments done by social psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané, where they staged emergencies to see how people would respond. Darley & Latané found something called a bystander effect; the more bystanders around the less likely people are to help.

Diffusion of responsibility takes place when we believe that we are not personally responsible to help, that the others around us will surely take action. This is more likely to happen when an emergency happens in a crowd.

To my knowledge, I was the only person who saw the woman fall, and it was clear to me that I had to help her. The responsibility was not diffused among many observers, and to just keep walking never occurred to me. Would I have stopped if there were already several people around her? I’m not sure, especially if there were nothing more I could do. I hoped that she would get medical attention soon, and that one of the neighbors who helped her home would check on her later.

The joggers might have kept going had I not asked them for help (they might not have seen her on the sidewalk behind the shrubbery), and the others who offered assistance likely did so because they felt they could contribute (a phone, a pillow). Once the others arrived, I wondered if I should stay. But ultimately I felt like I should since I promised the lady I wouldn’t leave her until she got help.

It’s tempting to think that our individual moral character will be the primary deciding factor in how we behave during an emergency. While character certainly matters, the people around us are important in ways we are not always aware. HOW ELSE MIGHT CROWDS AND OBSERVERS SHAPE OUR BEHAVIOR?