

The Bystander Effect

Albert Einstein said that “World is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil but because of those who look on and do nothing”. Bystander is the one who is present during an event but does not take part in the same. While being a bystander is not a bad thing, some situations requires us to do more than just being a bystander. Let’s try to understand what these situations are and the responsibilities that come along with it.

Accidents in India

In India according to statistics of 2017, the total deaths due to road accidents is around 1,50,000 per year which is equal to 400 accidents per day. This accounts for 3 deaths every 10 minutes. The Law Commission of India stated that 50% of those killed in road accidents could have been saved had timely assistance been rendered to them.

The World Health Organisation states that 50% of the victims die in the first 15 minutes due to serious cardiovascular or nervous system injuries and the rest can be saved through by providing basic life support during the ‘Golden Hour’, which is the first hour after an injury is inflicted. Hence the role of the bystander is critical in providing emergency care to the victim.

When there is a mishap like an accident, we expect the nearby people to attend to it immediately by providing first aid and calling an ambulance if necessary. While this is the expected behaviour, there are multiple instances where the accident victims are left unattended on the road, while the bystanders either casually pass by as if it were none of their business or just gather around to watch and even click pictures and videos of the scene.

The most common reason why bystanders do not assist a road accident victim is their fear of getting involved with police and other authorities. They are afraid of the possible lengthy legal proceedings that they have to go through for helping a victim.

The other reason may be the hassle with hospitals which were previously unfriendly towards such scenarios. This may be disclosing their personal information, bearing initial cost of the treatment without a guarantee that they might receive it back.

Good Samaritan Law

While people may blame the government for not taking any measure and the rigid system that they are part of, this is actually not true. On March 30, 2016, the Supreme Court of India gave "force of law" to the guidelines for the protection of Good Samaritans.

The purpose of a Good Samaritan law is to provide legal protection to bystanders who come to the aid and rescue of victims of road crashes by instructing police and hospitals not to hassle people who provide emergency help.

Various states have already approved this ruling of supreme court with Karnataka being the first to do so. Karnataka government has also extended financial assistance to those who help accident victims. Others states also have started to follow Karnataka.

Even after 3 years since Supreme Court's Judgment on Good Samaritan Law, number of accident victims who are left unattended to have not come down. An argument can be made that majority of the people are not aware of this law. Despite being unaware of the law, is any reason justifiable when a life is at stake? Is this where civilization is heading? What could be the reasons for such inhumane behaviour?

Let's leave all other reasons aside and try to understand the psychology behind the people for not helping a person in an emergency by a phenomenon called as bystander effect.

The Bystander Effect

The bystander effect is a social psychological claim that individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when other people are present; the greater the number of bystanders, the less likely it is that one of them will help. There are two major factors that contribute to the bystander effect:

First, the presence of other people creates a diffusion of responsibility. Because of the presence of other observers, individuals do not feel as much pressure to take action, since the responsibility to take action is thought to be shared among all of those present.

The second reason is the need to behave in correct and socially acceptable ways. When other observers fail to react, individuals often take this as a signal that a response is not needed or not appropriate.

Bystander effect in Corporate

Bystander effect is not just limited to emergency situations like accidents, but recent large-scale real-world evidence has called the nature of bystander effect into question. It may be a kid getting bullied at school with no support from his classmates or a common problem that everyone is facing in an office but which does not get reported or a woman getting harassed publicly. All these events have mute bystanders as common. Let's see what bystander effect means specifically in terms of an organization:

A company may claim to have zero tolerance for things like sexual harassment, discrimination on race, religion or gender. But not all employees will be religiously following these policies of the company. Multiple instances of sexual harassment at the workplace have come into light recently on social media with platforms like "me too". There are still a large proportion of issues which haven't been reported.

The victims in such cases are hesitant to come forward for various reasons. The reasons might be not having necessary proof to prove their point, or it may be fear of getting fired especially if the person harassing them is their boss. If multiple employees know of the issue, chances are less that one of them will come forward and report the issue due to diffusion of responsibility.

Can you prevent Bystander effect?

Some psychologists suggest that simply being aware of this tendency is perhaps the greatest way to break the cycle. When faced with a situation that requires action, understanding how the bystander effect might be holding you back and consciously taking steps to overcome it can help. One of the recent trends made an attempt to create awareness of bystander effect.

Mannequin Challenge

The Mannequin Challenge was a viral Internet video trend which became popular a couple of years ago in which people remain frozen in action like mannequins while a moving camera

films them. you are wondering what mannequin challenge has to do with bystander effect, let me explain:

Although Mannequin challenge was initially started by group of high school students in Florida and later became a trend in social media to an extent where sports team and celebrities started to take up this challenge, it was later used to create awareness regarding the bystander effect. As opposed to traditional Mannequin challenge, a victim in the video will be calling out for help while people around the victim remain frozen. Such videos tried to convey a strong message which is, “Don’t be a Mannequin” when somebody else needs your assistance.

There will be multiple scenarios in our life which demands action from us, yet most of us choose to remain ignorant. Knowingly or ignorantly we all might be victims of bystander effect. It’s easy to sit in the comfort of our home and to comment on standing up and doing the right thing. But when something happens to someone out of our family or friends circle, we tend not to take any action. Awareness about this effect might change the way people behave. It’s not sufficient if we just stand up for our self, we also have to stand up for what we believe in, we have to stand up against something that we feel is not right and take ownership of an emergency situation without caring what other people think. We have to stop being just bystanders and take a stand.

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