



BLOG July 8, 2010

## Why Groups of People Don't Help Accident Victims (And What To Do About It), Part 1

One of the most disturbing stories that we see on the news is the all too frequent story of a person that is hurt or injured and a large group of people just walking or passing by without helping. If you're anything like me, you see the stories of group bystander inaction and think, "How can those people not help? Why aren't they stopping?"

I've often wondered that, but now I may know why.

Since I'm a trial lawyer, I try to read books that relate to jury persuasion. I'm currently re-reading [Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion](#) by Dr. Robert Cialdini, a professor of psychology. In one chapter of the book, Dr. Cialdini concludes that bystander inaction is caused by the psychological phenomenon of social proof.

The principle of social proof states that one way people determine the proper way to act is by looking at the way others are acting. Social proof is the reason that television production companies use laugh tracks — because we tend to laugh more and think things are more funny even though we know the laugh tracks are fake and canned. Social proof is the reason that bartenders or church ushers sometimes put a few dollars in the tip jar or collection plate. Social proof is the reason that advertisers use testimonials or tells us how many other people use their products.

And social proof probably explains bystander inaction.

In many instances, an emergency isn't obviously an emergency. Is the man having a heart-attack or is he just drunk? Is it a fight or just a marital spat?

Generally, when people know an emergency exists, they are pretty good about helping. For example, a number of studies in Florida involved staged accidents. When it was clear that the person involved in the accident was hurt, then the person received assistance in over 90 percent of the cases, regardless of how many people were around.

The problem of group bystander inaction really occurs when no one is sure the person is hurt. When there are uncertainties, the tendency is to look around and see what others are doing. And that's where social proof comes into play. If you are walking past something, unsure of whether you should do anything, and you see others just walking by, the principle of social proof tells you to just walk by also.

Social proof kicks in when there are groups of people who are ignoring the accident victim. It turns out that instead of safety in numbers, someone that is hurt has a better chance of being helped if only one person is present. Dr. Cialdini notes several studies that support this conclusion. In one experiment, college students in New York acted as though they were having epileptic seizures. When there was only one bystander present, the student received an offer of help 85 percent of the time. But when five bystanders were present, the student only received an offer of help 31 percent of the time.

Another study involved smoke coming from under a door. Seventy-five percent of the individuals who passed by reported the leak, but when the leaks were seen by three-person groups, the smoke was reported only 38 percent of the time.

Citing these studies (and many more), Dr. Cialdini concludes that groups that ignore fail to provide aid to those in need aren't "cold" or uncaring. They are simply responding to the tried and true psychological principle of social proof.

He also concludes that in the accident context, social proof can come back and bite all of us. Like the people in the study, if we're in an accident, we're less likely to get help from a group of witnesses than if there is only one witness around.

So the important question is, "What can we do to protect ourselves in such a situation?" The solution will be in our next post.



BLOG July 9, 2010

## Why Groups of People Don't Help Accident Victims (And What To Do About It), Part 2

In [Why Groups of People Don't Help Accident Victims \(And What To Do About It\), Part 1](#), we looked at the phenomenon of groups of people who fail to stop and render aid to those that need help. The conclusion reached by Professor Dr. Robert Cialdini is not that people are uncaring, unkind or don't want to help. Instead, he concludes that groups don't help because of the psychological principle of social proof.

When we are uncertain about whether someone is hurt, we look to others' actions to see how we should act. When others don't help, we don't help. Thus, a person in an accident is more likely to get help when one person is around than when multiple people are around.

So what can we do if we're in an accident to make sure we get help?

Strangely, Dr. Cialdini found himself in exactly that situation. He was involved in a car wreck. As he knelt in the road beside his door, the light changed, and the waiting cars began to slowly drive by. Drivers gawked, but didn't stop to help. He was suddenly the victim of the phenomenon he studied.

To stop this, Dr. Cialdini notes that the key to not being a victim is to realize that most bystanders who don't help are just unsure of whether there is an emergency and, if there is, what their responsibilities should be.

He suggests that you not allow the bystanders to decide that your situation is not an emergency. You need to use the word "help" to make sure the bystanders know that it's not an emergency.

But you must do more than that. You must also answer their other uncertainties about how they should respond. Dr. Cialdini suggests picking out a particular person. Stare, speak, and point directly at that person. For example, "You, sir, in the blue jacket. I need help. Please call an ambulance." With such action, the study suggests that you'll get a quick, effective response.

Dr. Cialdini tried to follow his own advice in his wreck. He says that he stood up so that he could clearly be seen and pointed directly to one driver, asking that driver to call the police. He then pointed to two other drivers and asked them to pull over to help.

The response was immediate. They summoned the police, helped blot blood from his head, volunteered to serve as witnesses, and even offered to ride in the ambulance with him to the hospital.

And their assistance was contagious. As others saw that it was an emergency, they stopped and tended to the other victim.

This time, social proof was working for them as it appeared that the proper thing to do was to stop and help.

So, heaven forbid you're in an accident, but if you are, take Dr. Cialdini's advice to heart to make sure that you get the help you need.