

Helping Behavior

Social psychologists study the circumstances in which people offer help to others.

The Bystander Effect

Research shows that people are less likely to offer help to someone in distress if other people are also present. This is called the **bystander effect**. The probability that a person will receive help decreases as the number of people present increases.

Diffusion of responsibility contributes to the bystander effect. A person does not feel as responsible for helping someone if several others are also present, since responsibility is distributed among all those present.

Influences on Helping

Researchers have proposed that bystanders who witness an emergency will help only if three conditions are met:

1. They notice the incident.
2. They interpret the incident as being an emergency situation.
3. They assume responsibility for helping.

Researchers suggest that people are most likely to help others in certain circumstances:

- They have just seen others offering help.
 - They are not in a hurry.
 - They share some similarities with the person needing help.
 - They are in a small town or a rural setting.
 - They feel guilty.
 - They are not preoccupied or focused on themselves.
 - They are happy.
 - The person needing help appears deserving of help.
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Reasons for Helping Others

Some social psychologists use the **social exchange theory** to explain why people help others. They argue that people help each other because they want to gain as much as possible while losing as little as possible. The **social responsibility norm** also explains helping behavior. The **social responsibility norm** is a societal rule that tells people they should help others who need help even if doing so is costly.

Another norm that explains helping behavior is the **reciprocity norm**, which is the implicit societal rule that says people must help those who have helped them.

Social Traps

When people act in their own interest, they can sometimes help others as well. However, in other circumstances, people can harm themselves and others by acting in their own self-interest. This sort of situation is called a **social trap**. Global warming is an example of a social trap: it is occurring because people act in their own self-interest when they buy fuel-inefficient cars.