

Research: The Emotions of Aid

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By Jessica Ruvinsky Summer 2011



"One death is a tragedy; 1 million is a statistic," Joseph Stalin is supposed to have said. The more people we see suffering, the less we care. It's an unfortunate quirk that psychologists so far have blamed on our brains: Humans are tuned to individuals, the thinking goes; we are just not capable of feeling compassion for whole groups.

A new study calls that comfortable conclusion into question. "The collapse of compassion is an active process," says Daryl Cameron, a doctoral candidate in social psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "It's not some passive limitation on human experience. It's the end result of an active choice not to feel something."

Cameron designed a series of experiments to find out why four people in pain don't get quadruple the sympathy of one. In one test, he had 60 college students read about one, four, or eight children from Darfur. The students who said they were better at regulating their emotions—who don't easily lose focus or control, and usually know how to make themselves feel better—reported being less upset by multiple Darfur children in crisis than by one. In another experiment, different students reading about these same children were told either to let themselves fully experience their emotions or to think objectively and be detached. Again, those who proactively regulated their emotions showed a collapse of compassion when viewing eight victims compared to one.

This suggests that people are perfectly capable of responding emotionally to groups. They just steel themselves against it. "If you really took everything to heart, to the full magnitude that all these disasters truly deserve, you'd probably be sitting home rocking yourself in a closet all day," says Elizabeth Dunn, a social psychologist at the University of British

Columbia who was not involved in the research. "We need to be able to cope."

Our capacity to empathize with a large number of people is good news for disaster relief, says Cameron. "If it is a choice, rather than a constraint, then we can try to get people to decide differently what they want to feel, and toward whom." The bad news is that we seem to care only when we don't have to act. Cameron's other experiment compared students who had been prompted with the idea of a donation with students who hadn't. "When people did not expect to have to help on the basis of their emotions, they experienced more emotion toward eight victims than toward one victim," he says. Opening your heart is a lot easier when there's no expected cost.

C. Daryl Cameron and B. Keith Payne, "Escaping Affect: How Motivated Emotion Regulation Creates Insensitivity to Mass Suffering," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 100, 2011.

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