

# Why do we blame the victim?

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In an age of GoFundMe campaigns, it's easier than ever to help family, friends and even strangers in times of need. It's also easy to look the other way. "Most people see themselves as cooperative and generous, but there's a cost to helping people who can't reciprocate," said Pascal Boyer, the Henry Luce Professor of Collective and Individual Memory

in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis.

In a new [study](#) published in February in *Evolution and Human Behavior*, Boyer and co-authors suggest that many people resolve this inner conflict by finding shortcomings in the person needing help. "It's a pervasive phenomenon, but it has barely been studied," he said.

For the study, Boyer and co-authors—including Eric Chantland, a data scientist in the Department of Anthropology in Arts & Sciences—presented test subjects with a variety of fictitious news stories describing cases of misfortune, such as someone in a [car accident](#) while texting and driving, someone shot by an unsecured gun and someone attacked by a bear while hiking.

Participants thought the stories were real, but each scenario was carefully designed to test a person's empathy and willingness to help. After reading each story, [test subjects](#) were asked to rate the character of the victim and their level of blame for the mishap.

In some experiments, participants were offered a chance to donate their total compensation for participating in the study, up to 60 cents, to help the victim. In others, they were asked if they would hypothetically be willing to help the person with their own money. After the experiments were completed, participants were reassured the stories were made up for the study.

Results suggested a general lack of generosity. For example, participants in one experiment offered to donate an average of about 15 cents to the victim, less than a third of the maximum amount possible. A closer look at the data across multiple experiments revealed an intriguing trend: The more character flaws participants saw in a victim, the less willing they were to donate. "They're saying that the victim doesn't deserve help," Boyer said.

The finding goes against a long-held assumption about human nature. In the 1960s, psychologists suggested people were reluctant to help victims of misfortune based on a fundamental belief that the world was fair and bad things only happened to bad people.

But Boyer says the idea of a just world is both uncommon and unfounded. "In most places, people think the world is deeply unfair," Boyer said.

Instead of making a blanket assumption that all victims somehow deserve their misfortune, people go out of their way to find fault in each victim on a case-by-case basis, Boyer said. "If I tell you a person was burned in a kitchen fire, you'll be sympathetic at first, but it's very likely you or someone else will at some point suggest he must have been doing something stupid."

Our willingness to find fault can sometimes take a dark turn. While it wasn't part of the study, Boyer noted that victims of sexual assault are often denigrated for wearing provocative clothing or putting themselves in unsafe circumstances when the actual blame lies squarely and completely on the person committing the assault. "It's a classic example of blaming the victim," he said.

A researcher studying at the intersection of anthropology and psychology, Boyer has long been interested in the ways humans treat less fortunate members of society. From the anthropological perspective, he noted, people have a long history of cooperation.

Scientists have found remains of prehistoric hunters and gatherers who lived for many years after a debilitating injury, irrefutable evidence they benefited from the generosity of others. At the same time, human history is full of examples of people being blamed for their own illness or misfortune, perhaps because they broke a taboo or angered a god.

As a psychologist, he's intrigued by the thought processes that can lead people to abandon the basic impulse to help others in need. "We're trying to create a model of what happens in a person's head to produce these ideas."

**More information:** Pascal Boyer et al, Victims of misfortune may not "deserve" help: A possible factor in victim-devaluation, *Evolution and Human Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2024.01.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2024.01.005)

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