

To escape blame, be a victim, not a hero, new study finds

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Great works and praiseworthy behavior may bring respect and admiration, but these won't help us to escape blame when we do something wrong, says a new study by researchers at the University of Maryland and Harvard University. To do that, the researchers say, one needs to be a victim not a hero!

In the study, participants responded to a number of scenarios that mirrored real-life moral transgressions, from stealing money to harming someone. Results revealed that, no matter how many previous good deeds someone had done, they received just as much blame - if not more - than someone with a less heroic background.

"People may come down even harder on someone like the [Dalai Lama](#), than they do on 'Joe Blow,' said author Kurt Gray, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Maryland." However, in our research those who have suffered in the past received significantly less blame - even if such suffering was both totally unrelated to the misdeed and long since past."

The article, titled "To Escape Blame, Don't be a Hero - be a Victim" is published in the March issue of the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#). The findings are based on three experiments conducted by Gray and Daniel Wegner, professor of psychology at Harvard University.

"Our research suggests that morality is not like some kind of cosmic bank, where you can deposit good deeds and use them to offset future misdeeds," said Gray, who directs the Mind Perception and Morality Lab at the University of Maryland. "Instead, people ignore heroic pasts - or even count them against you - when assigning blame."

Gray suggests that the explanation for these findings is our tendency to divide the world up into moral agents - those who do good and evil - and

moral patients - those who receive good or evil.

"Psychologically, the perceived distance between a hero and a villain is quite small, whereas there's a wide gap between a villain and a victim. This means that heroes are easily recast as evil doers, whereas it's very hard to turn a victim into a villain."

Favorite Strategies of Fallen Celebs Confirmed

In the experiments involved in this study, those who highlighted past suffering were held less responsible for transgressions and given less punishment. According to the authors, this fact suggests an explanation for why many celebrities immediately go into rehab or claim victimhood after being caught doing something wrong. Of course, this research doesn't address whether someone is actually blameworthy, but it does indicate a clear strategy for escaping blame.

In fact their research finds that people had trouble even remembering the misdeeds of victims. In one experiment, people read about either a hero, normal person, or a victim stealing some money, and then were given a surprise memory test after. Far fewer people remembered the victim stealing money.

The authors note that there certainly are benefits from good deeds for both individuals and society. For example they say, "not only do virtuous deeds help the recipient of the deed, but research suggests that even small acts of good can serve to significantly improve the doers mood."

But "whether you are trying to defend yourself against a spouse's wrath for a missed birthday or save yourself from execution for a grisly murder, your task is to become the ultimate victim . . . with stories of childhood abuse, of broken hearts and broken arms," Gray and Wegner write.

Provided by University of Maryland

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