public health bodies should consider targeting, and even incentivising, influential individuals online (i.e., those who have the capacity to diffuse information among a large online social network). For example, it may be particularly useful to target social media ‘influencers’, individuals with a strong online presence and a large number of adolescent followers. If these individuals model positive social distancing behaviour and communicate the risk of COVID-19 through their platform, adolescents may listen. An advantage of targeting social media influencers is that they exist across a number of domains of interest (e.g., different hobbies) and so are likely to be able to target large disparate groups of young people.

Concluding Remarks

Although the coronavirus appears to pose a low risk to adolescents themselves, their willingness to follow social distancing guidelines is essential to reduce the risk for other people. Adolescent susceptibility to peer influence can be beneficial and should be harnessed by public-health campaigns to increase social distancing. We propose that adolescents themselves have a great capacity to influence each other to change norms and peer expectations towards public-health goals. Especially important in creating change is the need to provide young people with the capacity to lead and enact their own ideas within their social networks. Asking adolescents to stay away from their friends at a key developmental period is a considerable challenge, but can be achieved by taking advantage of adolescent social influence.

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References


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Catastrophe Compassion: Understanding and Extending Prosociality Under Crisis

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How do people behave when disasters strike? Popular media accounts depict panic and cruelty, but in fact individuals often cooperate with and care for one another during crises. I summarize evidence for such 'catastrophe compassion', discuss its roots, and consider how it might be cultivated in more mundane times.

A Surprising Response to Calamity

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, news reports suggested that the natural disaster had quickly been followed by a human one. Unchecked by law enforcement, New Orleanians had apparently committed countless brazen crimes [1]. The New York Times described the city as a “snake pit of anarchy, death, looting, raping, marauding thugs” [2].

These harrowing stories shaped the reaction of the authorities to the crisis – who, for example, deployed the national guard to “take control” of the city instead of focusing on humanitarian relief. The stories were also inaccurate. Although crime did occur in New Orleans following Katrina, victims by and large remained peaceful, and many helped one another [1,3].

For decades, social scientists have documented two narratives about human behavior during crises. The first holds that, following disasters, individuals (i) panic,
expressed greater intent to follow distanc-
ting to protect public health
of people have engaged in physical dis-
ting with donations and volunteers, a phenom-
with one another [3,5,6]. Unaffected
on_importance, and can shift one’s ten-
dency to act prosocially towards people
in novel groups. Identities also tend to
matters most when they contain specific
characteristics such as shared goals and
shared outcomes.

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denly be linked in the most important de-
ovo group to which they have ever be-
ong at band practice or a Buckeyes game. Even new
identities created in a laboratory can take on impor-
tance, and can shift one’s tendency to act prosocially
against people
in novels.

(ii) ignore social order, and (iii) act selfishly.
This cluster of beliefs characterizes popular
media accounts of disaster, as well as lay forecasts. In one study, members of
the public generally agreed with statements including ‘when there is an emer-
gency, crowd members act selfishly’, and ‘when there is an emergency, social
order breaks down’. Agreement further tracked support for ‘coercive’ handling of
disaster by authorities, such as keeping the public uninformed. Interestingly, police
officers – who presumably have extensive experience with people in crisis – were
significantly less likely to agree with these statements [4] (additional references
are given in the supplemental material online).

The second narrative comes from historical records. Far from rendering people an-
tisocial and savage, disasters produce groundswhells of prosocial behavior and
feelings of community. In their wake, survivors develop communities of mutual
aid, engage in widespread acts of altruism, and report a heightened sense of solidarity
with one another [3,5,6]. Unaffected people descend on scenes of disasters to
volunteer, as well as flooding them with donations and volunteers, a phenom-
emon known as ‘disaster convergence’ [3].

I refer to positive social behaviors in the face of negative circumstances as
‘catastrophe compassion’. Catastrophe compassion is widespread and consist-
tent; it follows earthquakes, war, terrorist attacks, hurricanes, and tsunamis, and –
now – a pandemic. As COVID-19 spreads, communities around the world have created ‘mutual aid spreadsheets’ to
help vulnerable neighbors [7], and billions of people have engaged in physical dis-
tancing to protect public health – perhaps the most populous act of cooperation in
history. Consistent with its prosocial na-
ture, one recent study found that people expressed greater intent to follow distanc-
ing when it was framed as a way to help
others rather than as a means to protect
themselves [8].

In addition to being prevalent, catastrophe compassion appears to be beneficial.
Prosocial behavior exerts positive effects on helpers – including increases in
happiness and decreases in stress and loneliness. Following disasters, mutual aid
also tracks increases in positive collective outcomes such as social connection,
solidarity, and shared resilience [9].

Roots of Catastrophe Compassion
Psychologists have pinpointed several mechanisms that might underlie catastro-
phic compassion. One pertains to the powerful nature of social identity. Each of
us identifies with multiple groups, for instance based on our generation, ideology,
or profession, and we commonly express loyalty, care, and prosociality towards
members of our own groups.

Social identity is also malleable. A person may be both a tuba player and an Ohioan,
but those identities vary in salience depending on whether they are at band prac-
tice or a Buckeyes game. Even new identities created in a laboratory can take
on importance, and can shift one’s tendency to act prosocially towards people
in novel groups. Identities also tend to matter most when they contain specific
characteristics such as shared goals and shared outcomes.

Disasters thrust people into a situation where their suffering is obviously shared with others. This could in turn
lower psychological barriers to disclosure, thus creating opportunities for
deeper connection, mutual help, and community. Consistent with this idea, in
the wake of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, individuals frequently talked about the disaster and its effects
on them for ~2 weeks [13]. A similar elevation in emotional conversations was found among Spaniards following the
2004 terrorist bombing in Madrid [6]. Researchers further found that sharing 1 week after the attacks predicted increases
in solidarity and social support, as well as decreases in loneliness, 7 weeks later.
Extending Catastrophe Compassion

As Solnit [3] observes, although few people would want a disaster to befall them, many survivors look back on disasters with a surprising amount of nostalgia. Floods, bombings, and earthquakes are horrific, but in their aftermath individuals glimpse levels of community, interdependence, and altruism that are difficult to find during normal times. Normal times then return, often accompanied by the boundaries that typically separate people.

Might catastrophe compassion outlast the catastrophes themselves, and if so, how? Some suggestive evidence emerges from the study of individuals who endure personal forms of disaster – adverse events such as severe illness, family loss, and victimization by crime. Such adversity often generates increases in prosocial behavior, which Staub and Vollhardt [14] have termed ‘altruism born of suffering’. The positive effects of adversity appear to extend in time.

One way to achieve this is to reify and formalize communities of disaster survivors such that they can remain visible to each other and salient to the identity of the survivors. Many such communities already exist – for instance in peer counseling associations that connect and support people who have endured addiction, have lost loved ones to war, or have been victims of assault. Broader groups also often emphasize remembrance of disasters, for instance when cultural rituals and practices commemorate a culture’s experience of hardship as a way of bonding individuals and generations.

Another way to extend catastrophe compassion is to simply remember it, and what it reveals about human social behavior. When people believe others will ‘go rogue’ following disasters, they are expressing one flavor of a more general, dim view of their fellow citizens. Individuals tend to be unduly cynical about human nature, and for example, demonstrably overestimate the extent that people are driven by self-interest [16]. Cynicism tracks decreases in psychological well-being, and can also become self-fulfilling, for instance when people conform to a selfish norm that they erroneously believe others are following.

As Drury [9] writes, ‘... in much of everyday life, particularly in Western and neoliberal societies, people are overwhelmingly positioned as individuals acting on the basis of personal self-interest ... [and] ... the repeated finding that people, in fact, act collectively in events where personal self-interest is threatened requires explanation.’ For all the suffering they produce, social behavior during and after disasters provides a counterpoint to the prevailing cynicism of our culture. Catastrophe compassion presents people with a view of ourselves that might surprise us – driven by ‘otherishness’ rather than by selfishness during crucially important moments. One way to honor and extend this positive behavior is to not be surprised by it any longer, but instead to realize that prosociality is common, and thus to expect – and demand – it from others and from ourselves.

References

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