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Article - Do you stand up or stand by...

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Do you stand up or stand by...

...when somebody is beaten up or when a young girl is molested? Or when there's domestic violence next door? We try to deconstruct 'motivational blindness'

BY DR RAJESH RAO



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A 19-year-old was harassed by four men in the crowded general compartment of a Mysore-bound train and later pushed out of the train because she resisted their advances. Later, the traumatic girl said, "No one came to my aid."

Earlier, a teenager in Guwahati was molested by a mob on a busy road for 30 minutes before she was rescued by the cops, she too said, "Nobody came to my rescue."

We can go on. In almost all such incidents, the public more often than not plays the role of a mere spectator. Why doesn't the 'silent' majority rise against these hoodlums who are always lower in number?

rushes a protective filter into place, thus steering awareness away from what threatens."

Psychiatrist Dr Vikram Palhath talks of insensitivity today where apathy fringed with urban fears makes the person go into head-defensive mode. "They feel if it's not happening to them, they should stay out."

And Nisha S Cadabam of Cadabam's Mind Talk, points out the fact that generally members of the crowd affirm with each other and wait for someone to give cue.

"It's like if one jumps the red signal, many more following that car will jump the signal," she said.

Here are some reasons for inaction, according to experts:

SELFISHNESS

Forget major incidents, even if the pub-

lican is not a bystander, the general thinking as it's none of my business. The feeling of anonymity is disappointing, says Dr Rao. Coupled with that is the urban-rooted fear of getting into unnecessary hassles.

AVOIDING ANXIETY-CAUSING INCIDENTS

All bystanders are not the same but many fall into the Anxious Avoidance personality types. This means if they bear a domestic fight next door, they will either close the window or move away from the room. They would rather not get into anything that causes them stress. So much so, there is a selective erasing from the memory and the person will not register anything seen.

NEW URBAN FAMILY SET-UP

Urban families are becoming smaller and more nuclear.



the general attitude is individualistic. There is that 'it's none of my business' feeling. There is no empathy for other people, says Cadabam as it is always 'them' and 'us'. Even neighbours become 'them'. There's no collective responsibility. People expect help but will not help others in trouble.

THE NATURE OF THE CROWD

Dr Rao speaks of two types of crowd—homogenous and heterogenous—whose behaviours are generally strikingly different. A 'passing by' crowd is a mixed crowd with different people from all walks of life. This crowd is less likely to jump in as a collective group. A homogenous group will generally have people from the same office, resident complex or so on and is more likely to be proactive and help a person in distress. Plus, premises matter. Overly public places are less likely to garner any action than a known place like a temple, canteen or an office. "The crowd visiting a known premises is likely to care for others in it," says Dr Rao.

SOCIAL AFFIRMATION VS INSTINCT

When in a group of bystanders, each member is waiting for someone to take the lead or to cue as to how to tackle the situation. Simple yet dangerous things get unreported only because no one else is doing anything. For instance, the real alarm ringing on a different floor is ignored because others are ignoring it even if personal instinct says that it has to be checked.

DANGER IN NUMBERS

Cadabam gives the example of an incident in New York in the sixties when a man murdered 29-year-old Catherine Genovese in front of at least 30 people. This led to the Theory of the Bystander Effect which states that the sense of responsibility is diffused when people are more. Shocking, but true.

The three experts are unanimous about the actions that can be taken:

PRESENCE OF MIND

Have the presence of mind to judge the situation. If it's domestic violence, approach the victim with a 'Are you okay?' question and judge for yourself. In a bigger incident involving a group of perpetrators, mobilise a group with you to intervene. If the rest are reluctant to act, at least make them all scream as an expression of verbal anger or to raise alarm.

NAME AND SHAME

Even if you are stuck in an unhealed crowd, take pictures of the perpetrators with phones so that they can be arrested. Publicise the faces as it happened in the Guwahati case.

RESILIENCE IN DAY-TO-DAY MATTERS

In day-to-day incidents, develop the spirit to speak up. Speak firmly and

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There is a parallel...
...psychologist Dr Anand A Rao of Psycho Clinic and Resource Centre. "Very often, people don't see what they see. And they don't intervene."

Author and psychologist Daniel Goleman has explained this in his book *Moral Lives, Simple Truths as Motivational Blindness*. He writes: "In order to avoid looking, some element of the mind must have known first what the picture scene contained, so that it knew what to avoid. The mind somehow grasps what is going on and

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THE ANATOMY OF A PERPETRATOR

ACCIDENTS TO psychiatrists Dr Vikram Prabhu, the people who indulge in these kinds of acts usually have anti-social personality traits. Over the years, callous and insensitive to other people's feelings, persistent disregard for social norms, inability to experience guilt and a low threshold for discharge of aggression, it is very hard for them when

they are displaying rampant aggressive behaviour. "There isn't one specific way to stop them," he says. Most of them, he says, are also sadistic and dominant in nature. Plus, the gender of feeling of male superiority and dominance comes into play. Usually, most have experienced abuse or violence at some stage of their lives.

...policy to a person who jumped the queue. Maintain your cool and composure when in any kind of incident.

BUILD AWARENESS

As some incidents like the New York incident were constantly discussed, the public in general became more aware of their responsibilities. This message has to be drilled into the psyche of the general public through film and messages. Of course, nothing is more effective than stringent laws.