

Preface

On August 25, 2017, my husband and I spent the day settling in our oldest child, Andrew, for the start of his first year at college. We went to Walmart to buy a minifridge and rug. We hung posters above his bed. We attended the obligatory goodbye family lunch before returning to our car to head home to a slightly quieter house.

Two weeks later Andrew called, which was unusual since, like most teenagers, he vastly prefers texting. His voice breaking, he told me that a student in his dorm had just died.

As he described it on the phone, the two of them seemed to have so much in common. They were both freshmen. They were both from Massachusetts and had attended rival prep schools. They both had younger brothers.

“What happened?” I asked.

He told me the student had been drinking alcohol with friends. He got drunk, and around 9 P.M. on Saturday, he fell and hit his head. His friends, roommate, and lacrosse teammates watched over him for many hours. They strapped a backpack around his shoulders to keep him from rolling onto his back, vomiting, and then

choking to death. They periodically checked to make sure he was still breathing.

But what they didn't do—for nearly twenty hours after the fall—was call 911.

By the time they finally did seek help, at around 4 P.M. on Sunday, it was too late. The student was taken to a hospital and put on life support so that his family could fly in to say goodbye.

Now, it's impossible to know whether prompt medical attention could have saved his life. Perhaps it wouldn't have. But what is clear is that he didn't get that opportunity. And this story—of college students failing to do anything in the face of a serious emergency—is hardly unusual.

It's not just college students who choose not to act, even when the stakes are high. Why did most passengers sit silently when a man was forcibly dragged off a United Airlines flight, recorded on a video that then went viral? What leads people to stay silent when a colleague uses derogatory language or engages in harassing behavior? Why did so many church leaders fail to report sexual abuse by Catholic priests for so many years?

Throughout my career—as a graduate student at Princeton University in the 1990s and as a professor at Amherst College over the last twenty years—my research has focused on the influence of social norms, the unwritten rules that shape our behavior. Although people follow these norms to fit in with their social group, they can also make crucial errors in their perception of these norms. The more I thought about these seemingly disparate examples of people failing to act, the more I began to see the root causes as driven by the same factors: confusion about what was happening, a lack of a sense of personal responsibility, misperception of social norms, and fear of consequences.

I have discovered through my own work that educating people about the power of social norms, pointing out the errors we so often make in perceiving these norms and the consequences of our misper-

ceptions, helps them engage in better behavior. I've done studies that show that freshman women who learn how campus social norms contribute to unhealthy body image ideals show lower rates of disordered eating later on, and that college students who learn that many of their peers struggle with mental health challenges have a more positive view of mental health services. Helping people understand the psychological processes that lead them to misperceive what those around them are actually thinking—to believe that all women want to be thin, that other college students never feel sad or lonely—reduces the mistakes and misunderstandings we make about other people and can improve our psychological and physical well-being. It can also push us to act.

In my very first introduction to psychology as an undergraduate at Stanford in 1987, I remember being fascinated when I learned how much being in a group influenced our own behavior. I was fortunate enough to have Phil Zimbardo—whose Stanford Prison Experiment remains one of the most famous and controversial studies in psychology—as my professor. It was quite an introduction to the field of social psychology!

Back then, researchers could design experiments and measure people's behavior, but we couldn't penetrate the mechanisms that explained them. We couldn't see what was happening in the brain. Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience have completely changed that. It is now possible to see in real time how certain scenarios, pressures, and experiences play out in the brain. As I'll describe throughout this book, these results have revealed that many of the processes that drive inaction occur not through a careful deliberative process, but at an automatic level in the brain.

My goal in writing this book is to help people understand the psychological factors that underlie the very natural human tendency to stay silent in the face of bad behavior, and to show how significant a role that silence plays in allowing the bad behavior to continue. In the first half of the book, I describe how situational and psychological

factors can lead good people to engage in bad behavior (Chapter 1), or, more commonly, to stay silent in the face of bad behavior by others (Chapters 2 to 5). Next, I show how these factors play out to inhibit action in distinct real-world situations, including bullying in school (Chapter 6), sexual misconduct in college (Chapter 7), and unethical behavior in the workplace (Chapter 8). I end by examining how some people are more able to stand up to others and what we can learn from these moral rebels (Chapter 9). In the closing chapter I look at strategies we all can use—regardless of our personality—to increase the likelihood that we will speak up and take action when we are most needed.

My hope is that providing insight into the forces that keep us from acting—and offering practical strategies for resisting such pressure in our own lives—will allow readers of this book to step up and do the right thing, even when it feels really hard. Ultimately, that's the secret to breaking the silence of the bystander—and making sure no one has to wait twenty hours after a serious injury before someone picks up the phone.