Imagine this, you and several friends are waiting at BART, heading for San Francisco for a parade, until you see a guy listening to music get beaten up by couple of
nobodies. After the beating, you see a bloodied and bruised man. People are taking pictures of the poor guy and ignoring the fact that he is heavily bleeding. Inside, you have two choices: stand up and help the helpless man, or make fun of the guy to blend in the crowd. This is where the bystander effect comes into play. The bystander effect is an effect that refers to the fact that people are less likely to help when they are in a group rather than when they are alone. The reasons why the bystander effect happens are because of diffusion of responsibility, fear, and the most common way of bystander effect, pluralistic ignorance.

One of the ways bystander effect happens is because of “diffusion of responsibility.” Diffusion of responsibility is the idea where the responsibility is spread to others in a situation where the person needs dire help. For example, in Loudon Wainwright’s article “The Dying Girl That No One Helped,” many witnesses saw Kitty Genovese getting stabbed and killed, but “another witness [had] the awful distinction of being the only person Kitty Genovese recognized in the audience taking in her final moments. She looked at him and called to him by name. He did not reply” (Wainwright). This is a clear case of diffusion of responsibility, as the responsibility was spread to every single witness watching. Another reason why is because as Kitty was laying there, she looked at the guy and called his name, but he didn’t reply. Another example is derived from Melissa Burkley’s article “Why Don’t We Help? Less is More, at Palma2

Least When it Comes to Bystanders,” which explains the ways of diffusion of responsibility. For instance, the two scientists experimented on what would happen in a true-to-life situation, “specifically, they had participants take part in a group discussion over an
intercom system [...] For those who were led to believe they were the only person who overheard the seizure 85 percent sought help” (Burkley). This is a true of example, as the participants sought help because their responsibility of helping was burdened upon that person. Another reason why is because the less people there are in that kind of situation, the more the responsibility of helping them is weighed upon that person. Diffusion of responsibility is true for many situations, like the article, “Less is More.”

The most common way of bystander effect is fear. Fear is the number one reason why bystander effect happens. For example, in Elie Wiesel’s best selling book, Night, Elie shares his experiences during the Holocaust in which “the general opinion that we were going to remain in the ghetto until the end of the war [...] Then everything would be as it was before. It was neither German nor Jew that ruled the ghetto- it was illusion” (Wiesel 16). This is a case of fear, as the Jews feared the actual truth because at that time, the German soldiers were living in their homes. Another reason why it’s fear because the sympathizers of Jews were afraid that if anyone helped the Jews, they would suffer the same fate as the Jews were facing. Another example is from an article called “Taking A Stand”, in which a German kid named Andre has a choice to make during Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. Eventually, Andre makes his choice, and “the following day, Andre’s family left Germany”

(Taking A Stand). This is an example of fear, as Andre was afraid that if he didn’t participate in the event, he would suffer, like the Jews. Another reason why this is fear because it was Andre’s choice to not participate in throwing stones at Jewish businesses. Fear itself is everyone’s biggest fear, and because of bystander effect, fear is one of most
common ways of the bystander effect.

Last, but not least, pluralistic ignorance is another reason why the bystander effect happens. For instance, in Michel Martin’s article, “The Moral Dilemma In Witnessing Acts of Violence”, the writer expresses her thoughts about a man named Allen Haywood who was attacked by two teenagers; she said that she is “even more worried about what seemed to be dozens of people around Haywood who apparently did nothing to stop the attack or help him, except take pictures” (Martin). This is an example of pluralistic ignorance, as the writer was not only shocked by the fact that Mr. Haywood took a beating, but Mr. Haywood took a beating and no one came to his aid. Another reason why is because if anyone tried to intervene during the confrontation, they were afraid they would get beaten up as well, so to mask their conscience, bystanders looked around one another and pretended not to react, if not, at all. Another example of pluralistic ignorance is from Elie Wiesel’s novel, Night, where Elie and his father, along with other Jews that are in concentration camps complain that “the world is not interested in us. Today, everything is possible, even the crematories...” (Wiesel 30). In this quote, the bystanders are the rest of the world because they are unaware of the situation that was unfolding at the concentration camps. Also, the U.S. and Britain were only focused on weakening and defeating Hitler, and both countries didn’t realize the Nazi regime were taking Jews into concentration camps until around 1944. Pluralistic ignorance is never good because if someone like you was put in a compromising situation, what would you do?
The bystander effect is everywhere. People of today can learn from this and become an upstander rather than be a bystander because it is just the right thing to do. In the Bible, there is a verse that says that helping someone in need is a kind act; otherwise, you will have committed a selfish act and sinned. The best thing to do for a person in need of dire help is to actually help them, and not be a bystander who feels as if the person in need will be fine. In doing this, the effects on bystanding will drop and people will realize that they should always be ready to help one another.

Works Cited


