

Personal relationships increase donations

August 22 2008

People tend to be more sympathetic to people suffering from the same misfortune as a friend. But friendship with a victim does not make people generally more sympathetic, according to the authors of a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Authors Deborah A. Small and Uri Simonsohn (both University of Pennsylvania) seek to understand the driving forces behind the phenomenon where people become more sympathetic when a friend or loved one falls ill or suffers some other misfortune. "The sympathy inherent to a close relationship with a victim extends to other victims, leading benefactors to prefer charities that help those suffering from the misfortunes that have affected their friends and loved ones," write the authors.

The authors conducted three studies that confirmed that people are more sympathetic to victims suffering the same misfortune as a loved one than victims of other misfortunes. In the first study, they interviewed strangers in a train station about their feelings about Alzheimer's disease, breast cancer, and job layoffs. They found that people who were closer to someone who had experienced one of the misfortunes were more sympathetic to the victims of those, but not to victims of the other misfortunes.

Surprisingly, in subsequent studies the authors were able to recreate this phenomenon in an experiment where friendships were newly created and the misfortune was losing \$10 that had just been given to the participants. After people became "friends" in the study, they were more

likely to donate money to a friend who lost money.

The authors note that participants' sympathy did not increase overall, just for victims of the same misfortune. "So friendship with a victim does not simply make people more sympathetic; rather it directs their sympathy to others with the same misfortune as their friend or loved one," they explain.

The authors' findings may help charities refine their fundraising strategies. "If, as our results show, a relationship created in the lab in a few minutes can significantly increase giving, then surely a charity can inspire a connection between a victim and a benefactor through its solicitations," they write.

Source: University of Chicago Press Journals

Citation: Personal relationships increase donations (2008, August 22) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-08-personal-relationships-donations.html>

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