

Spirit of giving: Desire to support disaster relief driven by multiple factors

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The scenario has been repeated countless times. A domestic or international disaster afflicts a significant amount of people. As images of the damage reach a broader audience, charitable giving increases. Many people donate money or time to help those affected regain their lives.

While charitable giving is far from universal, the initial response to a tragedy is generally the same, according to a Kansas State University [social psychology](#) expert.

"When individuals see others in [emergency situations](#), they experience arousal," said Donald Saucier, associate professor of psychology. "The arousal is uncomfortable and they seek to reduce it."

What happens next depends on the individual, Saucier said. Arousal, an increased awareness of a specific situation, causes some to avoid it by ignoring the situation or thinking of it as less of an emergency. But some people attempt to alleviate their anxiety by trying to help. This support can come in one or more ways, including monetary support, time and effort.

Different theorists argue that individuals engage in a cost-benefit analysis of what is most helpful and least expensive when deciding how to respond to the emergency situation, Saucier said. The final decision is based on how individuals value different types of help.

The scope of the disaster is also influential, he said. The more dire the situation, the more likely it will increase anxiety -- which increases [motivation](#) to reduce the anxiety. Another factor is geographic proximity.

"When the disaster is closer to them -- like [tornadoes](#) in the United States versus earthquakes in Japan -- it would be expected that helping efforts would increase," Saucier said. "The extent to which the potential helpers can empathize with the targets would also be a factor."

It's challenging to identify when such [social behavior](#) is learned, but evidence suggests it is reinforcing, Saucier said.

"It may reduce the helper's own anxiety, it may make the helper feel good, and it is hoped it will improve the target's situation," he said. "That means that once it is enacted, it is more likely to continue in the future."

In the end, that support could have a long-term impact on personal behavior. "Doing so may be enough to increase the future likelihood of helping," Saucier said.

Provided by Kansas State University

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