

Why ordinary people become heroes

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

You've just witnessed a horrific car crash. Your heart is pounding, you're in shock. And the decision you make in the next thirty seconds could be the difference between life and death.

Will you help, or walk away?

The factors influencing a person's decision to provide assistance, or not,

in a life-threatening [medical emergency](#) are being explored in a new Flinders University study.

As part of her PhD, Anna Hall from Flinders' School of Nursing and Midwifery will interview witnesses to a range of real-life emergencies, including car accidents, heart attacks, fires and falls, to find out what motivated their decision to intervene before ambulance crews arrived on scene.

With ambulance [response times](#) on the rise due to increasing callouts, Ms Hall said the help provided by bystanders in the minutes before [paramedics](#) arrive could save a life.

"Nationally, there are more than 1.4 million [emergency situations](#) every year," Ms Hall said.

"The number of [emergency](#) callouts is increasing so ambulance response times are getting longer, with response times varying from 8.5 to 19.7 minutes in capital cities and 8.3 to 23.1 minutes in South Australia," she said.

"These extended response times mean that people who are at the emergency scene may be the difference between life and death for the victims.

"While paramedics do an incredible job, the victims still need to be alive when the paramedics arrive. Anything bystanders can do to help the victim helps the paramedics."

While she is still recruiting interview participants, Ms Hall said she suspects a range of factors influence a bystander's decision-making process, including shock and the fear of being sued.

"Witnessing a medical emergency can be extremely traumatic – these witnesses are potentially faced with broken bones, severed limbs, unconscious people or death.

"Sometimes they're in shock so they freeze. Sometimes they don't know what to do – or think they'll do more harm than good – and sometimes they're scared of being sued, which is a myth because Good Samaritan laws protect people from undue liability when they provide assistance, advice or care to another person in an emergency."

Now in her second year of research, Ms Hall says she was inspired to explore the issue after her brother, Joe, received life-saving care from a bystander following a serious car crash in 2009.

"He wouldn't be alive if it weren't for the witness who stopped to help when other people kept driving.

"It got me thinking, why do some people decide to help while others turn away?"

Study participants will receive information about counselling services, Ms Hall said, in case they are feeling traumatised by their experience.

"I'll be interviewing ordinary, everyday people who aren't health workers so it's important to conduct the research sensitively and provide pathways to support if they are suffering post-traumatic stress."

By gaining insights into why people choose to help or not, Ms Hall says she hopes her research will inform policy and debate on the role of bystanders in emergencies.

"Research shows that if a victim of an emergency receives first-aid before paramedics arrive they have an increased chance of survival.

"If we understand what goes through peoples' minds at the scene of an emergency we could potentially develop guidelines to alleviate their fears and ultimately encourage more people to help."

Provided by Flinders University

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