

The victimization quandry: To help victims we have to stop blaming them

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A woman is brutally assaulted, but rather than receiving the sympathy she deserves, she is blamed. If she had dressed differently or acted differently, or made wiser choices, others say, she would have been

spared her ordeal. For victims, this "victim blaming" is profoundly hurtful, and can lead to secondary victimization.

Psychologists have long realized that blaming victims is a defense mechanism that helps blamers feel better about the world, and see it as fair and just. But ways to prevent victim blaming have been elusive—until now.

A team of researchers, led by a Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N) psychology professor, Dr. Kent Harber, has found a surprisingly direct way to spare victims the unwarranted social insult to their personal injuries: Emotional disclosure. They found that that witnesses blame victims much less if they express, in writing, the disturbing thoughts and feelings that victims' ordeals arouse in them. However, witnesses who suppress these feelings, and who keep their distress locked inside, do blame victims.

The research team—Harber, Peter Podolski of the New Jersey Institute of Technology, and Christian H. Williams of RU-N's psychology department - explains its findings in the article, "Emotional Disclosure and Victim-Blaming," to be published in the May 2015 edition of the journal *Emotion*.

"Victim-blaming is pervasive," says Harber. "It is experienced by sufferers of deadly illnesses, crippling accidents, natural disasters, physical assault, economic hardship; indeed, nearly all bad events. For victims, this blaming is profoundly hurtful and it can wound as deeply as the injury itself."

Previous research has explained why observers blame victims, notes Harber. "It helps blamers retain faith in a just, fair, and controllable world where bad things mainly happen to bad (or inept, or unwise) people."

Seeking a way to reduce victim blaming, Harber, Podolski and Williams conducted laboratory experiments using college students who viewed one of two movie clips. Some watched scenes from the 1988 film *The Accused*, which showed the violent sexual assault of a woman in a bar. Others watched a clip of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in heated economic debates with adversarial male political leaders. Thatcher, though embattled, was not a victim.

After the viewings, audience members were asked to write about the film they had seen. "Suppressors" could only provide factual, objective observations; they were not allowed to disclose their feelings.

"Disclosers" were permitted to freely express their emotional reactions. Disclosing and suppressing had no effect on attitudes toward Thatcher, the non-victim. Results were markedly different for those watching the rape scene from *The Accused*. Suppressors, who could not reveal their emotions about the rape victim, were more likely to blame her.

Disclosers, in contrast, blamed the victim much less. And the more words the disclosers wrote, and the more distress they conveyed, the less they blamed the victim.

"This first study confirmed that disclosure reduces victim blaming, but it left a somewhat troubling possibility unanswered," notes Harber. "What if disclosure, by alleviating the emotions that trigger blaming, tempers blaming of assailants as well as assault victims? If so, disclosure would absolve victimizers as well as victims."

The research team then conducted a second study which showed that this was not the case. This research methodology was nearly identical to the first study but with one exception: viewers also evaluated the adversarial men in the movies they viewed: Thatcher's opponents, for subjects who viewed the Thatcher documentary, and the rape victim's attackers, for those who viewed *The Accused*. Results showed that disclosure only reduced blaming for the rape victim; it had no effect on attitudes

towards her assailants, who were condemned equally by disclosers and suppressors. As in the first study, suppression led to blaming of the rape victim. In fact, the victim was faulted nearly as much as were her attackers. Disclosing and suppressing had no effect on Thatcher's adversaries, as expected.

According to Harber, the combined studies "suggest that people can best help [victims](#) by first addressing their own emotional needs."

Harber says this research "has already raised interest among law scholars, because of its implications for juries. Jurors are often prohibited from discussing cases until final deliberation. Our research suggests that this forced suppression might affect jurors' attitudes toward victim/plaintiffs." The research might also inform rape counseling, says Harber. By encouraging survivors' families and friends to disclose rather than suppress their emotions—perhaps to trained therapists—survivors might be spared inadvertent blaming from those closest to them.

More information: *Emotion*, [dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000056](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000056)

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