

SELF HELP

Roots of violence – what we can do about it

By *Helene Stoller*

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Nowadays, it seems like violence abounds in society, from the massacre in the Nordstrom store to the latest college shooting rampage and even to the senseless slashing murder of a New York City psychologist.



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Why is violence increasing, and, more importantly, what can we as individuals in a “civilized” society do about it?

Three eminent psychologists recently discussed these questions. Social psychologist Philip Zimbardo, PhD has studied group violence for many years. He views evil as seductive and contagious, spreading through society like a

disease. To understand violence and evil and prevent their spread, he says, we need to analyze three factors:

- What the individual brings into the situation.
- The environmental forces that influence the individual.
- Who or what created those forces.

He sees societal forces as key in both the creation and elimination of violence.

Evil and violence are rooted in distorted thinking patterns, according to cognitive therapy pioneer Aaron Beck, PhD.

People locked in emotional disagreements begin to have distorted views of each other, as we even see in the daily news about our relatively peaceful town of Bluffton, where anyone can be vilified for doing something that irritates someone else.

In mass violence, one or more individuals in one group demonize members of another group. Once that happens, all

of the people in the group become homogenized into a single category: the enemy that must be destroyed, said Dr. Beck.

Frank Farley, Ph.D., cited other causes of evil – the thrill of breaking social rules and exercising power.

The adrenaline rush and exhilaration a perpetrator obtains from breaking societal rules and seeing shock, surprise, and fear on victims' faces lends a morbid excitement and sense of power to violent acts, making violence seem like the more attractive route to power than the everyday pro-social acts of the majority of citizens.

Notice what gets the majority of the media play these days. The everyday pro-social actions of Joe Everyman, who brings his elderly neighbor her newspaper, walks her dog, and provides her some companionship are too boring for public consumption, in the view of the media.

Media focuses on grand-scale disasters where many lives are lost and the calamitous actions of high-profile people (e.g., Brittany Spears). People pay more attention to alarming events than to pro-social acts, reinforcing the idea that to gain attention, one must commit an outrageous deed.

Society, that is each and every one of us, needs to work against the influence of violence and hate by lionizing everyday heroes, from our imaginary Joe Everyman to a teen who stands up for a bullied peer to the man who stood in the way of the tanks at Tiananmen Square.

By attending to what is positive around us, rather than what is hateful and negative, we can make the attraction to doing good deeds far stronger than the attraction to violence and work to stem the tide of violence in our society.

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