



WHY DO GOOD PEOPLE DO BAD THINGS?

"Never be afraid to do what's right, especially if the well-being of a person or animal is at stake. Society's punishments are small compared to the wounds we inflict on our soul when we look the other way."

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

OVERVIEW

Students learn about what science has discovered about why good people don't stand up for those being harmed; they then explore and practice what it means to be an upstander.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- At the start of a social studies unit that focuses on a time when ordinary people perpetuated harm to another group, or who acted as bystanders rather than upstanders, e.g., the Holocaust
- To provide an example of how science has been used (unethically sometimes) to help us learn about human behavior
- Anytime during the school year, but especially at the beginning of the year to create a classroom and school climate in which bullying and other forms of harmful behavior are not tolerated

TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple Days

LEVEL

- High School

MATERIALS

- Paper and index cards
- Access to internet and projector to show videos:

- [Philip Zimbardo: The Milgram Experience](#)
- [The Bystander Effect](#) (optional)
- [President Obama Discusses Everyday Heroism](#)
- [Wesley Autry](#) (optional)
- Greater Good Science Center article [We Are All Bystanders](#) (optional)
- Handout #1: [Scenarios: How Could You Bring About a Virtuous Outcome?](#)
- Handout #2: [Professor Zimbardo's 10 Strategies](#)
- Writing materials
- Optional: [PowerPoint of lessons](#) from Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Experience what it feels like to be encouraged to do something unethical
- Examine how the reasons good people do bad things relate to their personal experience of being encouraged to do something unethical
- Understand the reasons why people choose to be bystanders rather than upstanders
- Evaluate the factors in moral scenarios that lead a person to be either an upstander or bystander
- Produce a list of actions, skills, and/or beliefs that can encourage a person to be an upstander

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Reflect on a time when you stood up for someone who was being bullied or harmed. How did it feel before, during, and after the incident? What inner resources or other factors encouraged you to stand up? What advice would you give for encouraging someone to be an upstander?

INSTRUCTIONS

Note: The instructions below refer to the slides in this PowerPoint of lessons from Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Use of the slides is optional.

PART 1: THE MILGRAM EXPERIMENTS (60 MINUTES)

- Tell students that for the next few days, they're going to learn about and discuss why good people do bad things. [Slide 1]
- Do a quick poll with students by asking:
 - How many of you would harm an innocent person? [Slide 3]
- Tell students that they're going to work in small groups to construct a "utopia" out of paper and index cards. Explain:
 - A Utopia is a perfect place, a perfect city, a perfect state.
 - In small groups, using the materials in front of them, they are to construct a Utopia.
 - Pay close attention to making it excellent. [Slide 4]
- After 30 minutes, have groups walk around to look at each other's work. [Slide 5]
- When each Utopia has in front of it a group that didn't create it, ask the group to destroy the work in front of them. [Slide 6]
- Next, ask students to produce a written response to their experience (especially focusing on their answer to the question asked of them at the start, "How many of you would harm an innocent person?"):
 - What did you think and feel when told to destroy someone else's work?
 - What did you think and feel when you saw your work destroyed?
 - What did your emotions tell you about this experience?
 - Why did you follow the order, if you did?
 - Did you see any of the following virtues present in the classroom: Courage, justice, honesty, compassion, self-discipline, gratitude, humility? [Slide 7]
- Have students discuss their answers in their groups. What do they have in common? What answers were different? What can they learn from each other?
- Discuss with the whole class.
- Point out that history is full of examples of ordinary people doing bad things that they later come to regret. One experiment that helps to explain how this can happen was conducted by Stanley Milgram in the 1960s. Read the following to students (or show Slide 8)
 - *Imagine.... You volunteer for a scientific experiment. You are told that you are helping to discover new ways of learning. You are shown into a room where you meet a scientist in a white coat and another person: the 'learner.'* You are going to be the 'teacher.' You are taken by the scientist into a different room. In the room is a large box with lots of switches. The box is designed to help the learner's memory. The learner, who is in the next room, has had to remember a lot of word pairs. You will call out one of the words through a microphone and the learner has to call out the word that goes with it. If the learner forgets, the box gives an electric shock to the learner. Each switch increases the shock by 15 volts, up to a total of 450 volts. If you want to stop at any time (perhaps because you can hear the cries of the learner through the wall) the scientist in the white coat tells you to carry on, as the experiment requires you to go all the way to 450 volts. The electricity in a wall socket is 240 volts. [Slide 8]
- To provide more background to this experiment, including why Milgram did it in the first place, show students [Philip Zimbardo: The Milgram Experience](#). (4:39)
- Share with students what Milgram says that to get good people to do bad things, you need:
 - An authority figure
 - An ideology (a 'good' idea to believe in)
 - No exits from the situation
 - Increments: It gets worse slowly [Slide 9]
- Ask students to reflect on the following:

- What elements of Stanley Milgram's experiment were present in this classroom to get you to follow a bad order?
- Remember how you felt (e.g., joy, anger, frustration, delight, anxiety). What do your emotions tell you about this experience?
- What questions does this experience raise for you about yourself? What does it tell you about your own character? [Slide 10]

PART 2: THE BYSTANDER EFFECT & DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY (30-45 MINUTES)

- Check in with students about the last session. Ask:
 - *What did you experience in the last session?*
 - *What did you come to know or learn in the last session?*
 - *What questions do you have arising from your experience?* [Slide 12]
- Read aloud or show students the slide with the quote: "All that is required for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." Ask students to comment on this quote. [Slide 13]
- Ask students to jot down in pairs what the expression 'a good Samaritan' evokes. Do any of them have any stories of being a good Samaritan? What questions do good Samaritan stories raise? Have students share their answers. [Slide 14]
- Give students the basic facts of the story of [Kitty Genovese](#).
 - Kitty was attacked outside the entrance to her flat in New York, in 1964.
 - The attack happened at 3:15 am, as she returned from work.
 - At least 12 people heard her being attacked. Only one person phoned the police.
 - One person shouted at the attacker and the attacker ran away. When nothing else happened, the attacker came back and continued the attack.
 - Kitty died on the way to the hospital; she was 28 years old.
 - Why do you think so few people went to Kitty's aid? [Slide 15]
- Ask students:
 - *What is your emotional response to this story?*
 - *Why do you think you feel they way you do? In other words, what do you think or believe about what happened to Kitty?* [e.g., anger will stem from the belief that rights have been infringed. This will help some students identify any of their own values that are affected by this story.]
 - *Do you have any explanation for why so few people came to Kitty's aid?*
- Tell or show students the slide about the aftermath of Kitty's death:
 - Kitty's death provoked outrage in the USA.
 - People wondered how neighbors could sit back and not intervene when someone was being attacked.
 - Psychologists began to research why nobody came to help Kitty.
 - They came up with the theories of 'bystander apathy' and 'diffusion of responsibility.'
 - These theories suggest that people often don't intervene because they are afraid of causing a fuss: "mind your own business." They also suggest that if we are part of a group when someone needs help, we will tend to assume that other people will act, so we don't have to. [Slide 16]
- To give students a more in-depth understanding of the bystander effect and diffusion of responsibility, have them view and/or read the following:
 - Soul Pancake's video "[The Bystander Effect](#)" (5:35) -- shows the bystander effect in action
 - Greater Good Science Center article "[We Are All Bystanders.](#)"

- Ask:
 - *Does the bystander effect help to explain what happened to Kitty? Are there other explanations?*
- Ask students to retell the Kitty Genovese story, but this time imagine that everyone involved had acted using the seven principal virtues—courage, justice, compassion, honesty, self-discipline, gratitude, humility. Ask:
 - *Which of the virtues would have made a difference to Kitty?*
 - *What would the virtues have looked like in action in this story? [Slide 17]*

PART 3: BECOMING AN UPSTANDER (45-60 MINUTES)

- Tell students that the focus of this session is to identify the practical strategies that can help good people to avoid doing bad things and turn them into heroes.
- Start by watching the video "[President Obama Discusses Everyday Heroism](#)". (0:55)
- Lead a short discussion with students about the video.
- Divide the class into small groups and either give them the handout "Scenarios: How Could You Bring About a Virtuous Outcome?" or show slide 19. [Note: One scenario mentions a "supply" teacher, the British term for "substitute" teacher. Another scenario mentions that a school decides to "exclude" 10 people; "excluding" is the British term for either suspending or expelling a student.] Students may also come up with more relevant scenarios on their own.
- Ask students to go through the scenarios in their small groups. What are the main barriers to acting virtuously in these situations (e.g., not wanting to upset the group, rushing into a quick decision, intending good things but failing to act)? [Slide 20]
- Share and discuss students' ideas with the whole class.
- In small groups, have students discuss:
 - What would they do in each scenario to bring about a virtuous outcome and overcome the barriers? (They should focus on precisely what they do to help them make the right decision.)
- Share and discuss students' ideas with the whole class.
- In small groups, have students evaluate the strategies that have been suggested: which of them will work best and overcome the barriers identified?
- Share and discuss students' ideas with the whole class.
- Ask students to go through the ten strategies by Professor Philip Zimbardo for avoiding evil either through the handout "Professor Zimbardo's 10 Strategies" or slide 21 (more detail on the strategies can be found [here](#)).
- Ask:
 - *For each of the scenarios they have looked at, what strategies apply and what results might they yield?*
 - *Do you think Zimbardo's strategies are as good as yours?*
- Ask students to find examples of real (everyday) heroes. You might show the video from HeroicImagination TV "[Wesley Autry](#)."
- Ask:
 - *What is it that makes these people heroic? Which of Zimbardo's guidelines did they use? Which of the seven principal virtues do they display? (courage, justice, compassion, honesty, self-discipline, gratitude, humility)*

CLOSURE/FINAL REFLECTION: (30 MINUTES)

- Individual Reflection [Slide 30]. Have students write down answers to the following questions:
 - Knowledge: Think back to the utopia lesson. What do you know and understand now that you didn't know and understand then?
 - Performance: Through thinking about why good people do bad things, what new strategies have you acquired to enable you to make better choices in difficult situations?
 - Character: What virtues would you like to develop to help you do good things in difficult situations? How will you develop them?
 - Questions: What questions remain unanswered for you about why good people do bad things?
- Reflection Conversations [Slide 31]. Tell students:
 - *Talk to four other people in the room. Compare your answers.*
 - *What answers do you share?*
 - *What answers are different?*
 - *What can you learn from each other?*
 - *How can you help each other to think about ways of developing character?*
 - *Agree on one thing you will do differently after today.*
- As a whole group, discuss the impact of these lessons.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

How did students respond to this practice? Did their understanding of why people choose to be either bystanders or upstanders deepen?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

The “bystander effect” occurs when being in the presence of other people keeps an individual from helping someone in need. According to numerous studies since the [1960s](#), this effect is evoked by three factors: 1) diffusion of responsibility or feeling less responsibility for helping when others are nearby, 2) pluralistic ignorance or believing that the help needed is not an emergency because others are not helping, and 3) evaluation apprehension or the fear of being judged by others when helping.

A more recent [neurological study](#) found that the bystander effect is even more complex than originally thought. Indeed, findings suggest that other factors play a role, such as a person’s ability to regulate the distressing emotions that occur when seeing someone in need of help, their perspective-taking skills when considering the experiences of both the person suffering and other bystanders, and finally their beliefs about whether they are capable of helping.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Helping others in need is a major part of life and something that students can learn to do early on. Growing their awareness of why they might not step up to help someone in a group situation—such as watching a student being bullied—may help them to overcome the internal and external barriers that keep them from reaching out.

In addition to practices such as this one, teaching students mindfulness and emotion skills can also cultivate their ability to overcome personal distress when seeing someone suffer, making them more likely to offer service.

SOURCE

[Secondary Programme of Study](#) was originally developed by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue, in partnership with the John Templeton Foundation.

The Jubilee Centre is a pioneering interdisciplinary research centre focussing on character, virtues, and values in the interest of human flourishing, based at the University of Birmingham. The Centre is a leading informant on policy and practice in this area, and through its extensive range of projects contributes to a renewal of character virtues in both individuals and societies. In addition to the Secondary Programme of Study linked above, a full suite of free teaching resources can be accessed here: <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/432/character-education>