

Why Don't We Get Involved?

This story is absolutely true. It happened at a restaurant in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina on July 26th, 2000. Imagine you're watching this scenario unfold while eating dinner with some close friends from work. After hearing what happened, I'd like you to consider what you would have done (if anything) had you really been there.

Although advertised as a "fun" place for families, the restaurant is known for its unusual service. That is, the waiters and waitresses wear humorous costumes and verbally heckle patrons while they eat. Thus, many customers go to this restaurant, one of a chain throughout the U.S., ready for mutual verbal harassment with the staff – all in good fun. It's common, for example, for the wait staff to place a paper hat on a customer's head. Of course these hats bear humorous and demeaning labels – like "Had sex with his minivan" or "Rapes sheep." Ha! Ha!

This story is about a table of five – mom, dad, their two children (Suzie, age 5 and Joey, age 7), and their 17-year-old niece – Anna (only the names have been changed). After ordering their meals, the heckling began.

From the start, the 17-year-old was targeted for ridicule. Her waiter, nicknamed Buttercup, first teased her about the small "star" tattoo on her shoulder. Then he brought out a paper hat with the label "Puberty Sucks" and placed it on her head. Anna calmly took off the hat and placed it on the floor. "What's the matter? Don't you like your hat?" teased Buttercup.

When Anna ignored this badgering, Buttercup got more intrusive. He took out a black magic marker and wrote "SLUT" across Anna's bare back. Onlookers laughed aloud, and Anna looked quite embarrassed. She didn't say a word though, and

continued to eat her meal. However, she was apparently upset, because her hand shook as she brought food to her mouth.

Seemingly enjoying the public attention for his antics, the waiter wasn't about to give up on getting a visible rise from Anna. He returned from the kitchen with a meringue pie, and you guessed it, he pushed it directly into Anna's face. Well, this was the last straw for Anna. Buttercup's intervention got the rise he wanted -- literally. The 110-pound teenager, of slight build, sprang from her chair – pie-filling dripping from her face – and tackled the 6 foot, 200-pound waiter.

After a brief scuffle on the floor, Buttercup stood up holding Anna by her ankles. He proceeded to carry her outside and dropped her safely in a dumpster. Soon Anna returned to her table in tears; she was immediately consoled by her aunt, who then accompanied her to the restroom. When the waiter delivered the check, Anna's uncle paid it and added a 10% gratuity.

Normal Reactions?

If you had been there, what would have been your reaction? When I heard this story, I was initially stunned by the lack of intervention. I imagined myself standing on a chair and announcing to the crowd that their meals are “on the house.” “Management will gladly cover everyone's food and drink to avoid the million dollar lawsuit Anna has every right to file!” And I visualized that I would have given this speech as soon as the waiter took a magic marker to Anna's back. That's when Buttercup crossed the line, right?

How could anyone have let this incident escalate to its outlandish outcome without intervening? I was astounded to learn that Anna's uncle not only paid the

check, but also added on a significant gratuity for the waiter who assaulted and embarrassed his niece. When later challenged by Anna's parents, the defense was "Everything happened so fast."

Hindsight is 20/20

I bet your reaction was not unlike mine. You can visualize yourself intervening to help Anna – right? At the very least, you would not have given the waiter a financial reward. But don't be so sure. There are a number of factors that inhibited intervention. Similar factors also hinder workplace intervention for safety and health.

So here's the tie-in to individual safety. While you were probably surprised to learn of the lack of actively caring intervention in the restaurant, analogous situations occur everyday in the workplace. Maybe the undesirable or risky behaviors are not as blatant as Buttercup's transgressions, but they are happening out there. The at-risk behaviors are usually not as intentional as Buttercup's, but they put people in jeopardy of being injured just the same.

After a person gets hurt our hindsight kicks in. "Why wasn't the environmental hazard removed?" "Why didn't someone warn her about being in the line of fire?" "Why wasn't the appropriate protective equipment used?" "Why didn't he ask for help in moving those heavy boxes?"

I'm sure you can think of specific instances where an injury would have been avoided, if someone had intervened. And perhaps you've already reflected on barriers that hampered intervention. Let's consider the circumstances that impeded intervention in the restaurant, and see whether they are relevant to industrial settings.

It's the Way It Is

The restaurant is known for hassling its customers. That goes with the territory. So if you want a quiet, peaceful dinner, go someplace else. The climate at this establishment invites interpersonal confrontation, from the attire of the staff to the props visibly available for “fun” interactions and practical jokes.

Obviously, we're talking about culture – a factor that is frequently entertained as a critical determinant of an organization's safety performance. Does management walk the safety talk, or deliver mixed messages? I've visited many plants, for example, where the behavior of people in leadership positions is not consistent with safety rules and regulations. I've been introduced by a plant manager as a consultant with an important safety message, and then this individual leaves the room, presumably for “more important business.” These examples, and many others I'm sure you've experienced, set the stage for compromising safety in the name of efficiency or productivity. In such a work culture, you can expect many opportunities for safety intervention to be overlooked.

Someone Else Will Help

Through rigorous behavioral research, social psychologists have found that the more people witnessing an event calling for intervention, the lower the probability any one person will help. A popular explanation for this “bystander apathy effect” is diffusion of responsibility -- meaning people assume another onlooker will help. And the more observers, the more reasonable it seems to make this assumption.

Given this, one possible reason a customer did not intervene to help Anna was the expectation that another patron would intervene. Actually, it's logical to assume that

the most appropriate people to intervene on Anna's behalf were those at her table. In fact, onlookers at other tables might think they'd be meddling if they offered Anna support. They might, in fact, suppose that Buttercup had a special relationship with Anna or her family, and this enabled the outrageous interaction.

Have you ever held back from intervening for safety because you figured someone else would or should help? Maybe you even felt it would be more proper for another person closer to the situation to step in. In many work cultures it's natural for individuals to feel reluctant to intervene on behalf of an individual on another work team. Not only might that be intruding, but it's reasonable to consider it more suitable for a work-team member to be the intervention agent.

What Should I Do?

Researchers have shown that individuals are more likely to help others in emergency situations when they know what to do. And naturally, the intervention from people who know what to do is more likely to be effective. So, observers without relevant training are quick to defer the intervention responsibility to another observer.

Assertiveness training, for example, helps people stand up for their rights and come to the realization their feelings and opinions matter, and should be expressed. Such training involves direct instruction and role-playing of specific verbal expressions to use in order to regain control in certain situations. Practicing what to say to resolve or alleviate a conflict beforehand enables people to intervene effectively in the "heat" of the moment. Likewise, practicing what to say before asking a coworker to be more safe will increase the likelihood you'll actually intervene and be effective.

So, when reflecting on a prior situation in which an intervention was called for but didn't occur, it's a good idea to consider what could have been done to help. Some people's personality makes it particularly difficult for them to stand up for their rights; these individuals are in special need of practicing assertive dialogue.

What should have been said to Buttercup when he wrote "SLUT" on Anna's back? What feedback should Anna's uncle have given to Buttercup and his manager, perhaps after refusing to pay the check? What should Anna have said to stifle the belittling interactions she found uncomfortable?

Did She Ask for It?

Did it ever cross your mind that Anna's reactions, or lack thereof, influenced the series of unpleasant exchanges? In the same vein, have you ever thought the victim of an unpleasant workplace conflict or an injury did something to deserve the negative consequence? In fact, it's common for people to view the victims of crimes or accidents as causing their fate. Social psychologists call this phenomena the "just world hypothesis," wherein people assume that we get what we deserve and deserve what we get.

I'll discuss this belief in a just world and it's ramifications for industrial safety in my *ISHN* article next month. For now, consider how this belief can be a barrier to helping others. Most observers of the confrontation between Buttercup and Anna were not privy to the verbal behavior that preceded and accompanied the successively more intrusive encounters. They derived their own explanations for the incident, and given the just world bias, many probably blamed Anna for her misfortune. Such bias provides a convenient excuse for not intervening.

Is this bias a barrier for safety-related intervention in some situations? Have you ever observed at-risk behavior and said to yourself something like, “What a dumb thing to do, if he gets hurt he deserves it.” This kind of mental script reflects the “just world hypothesis” and offers one more reason for not intervening on behalf of another person’s health or safety.

In Conclusion

This article described a true, but extraordinary series of encounters in a restaurant that warranted a helping intervention from any of a number of onlookers. Potential barriers to helping the victim of this incident were discussed, and linkages were made to the challenges of intervening for injury prevention. Specifically, four aspects of the restaurant scenario contributed to the victim’s plight: 1) interpersonal confrontation is expected in the particular setting, 2) the high number of observers made it easy to shirk personal responsibility, 3) a suitable action plan was not readily available, and 4) the belief that the victim probably did something to deserve her punishing treatment.

I hope you see the relevance of these four barriers for safety-related intervention. Obviously, the work culture determines whether interpersonal intervention is viewed as actively caring or meddling. Education and training programs affect whether an effective intervention strategy is even available. Next month I’ll say more about people’s belief in a just world which supports the mental script, “It will never happen to me,” and contributes to our reluctance to help others.

Here’s hoping the next time you see someone working at-risk you will intervene, and instead of asking “Why don’t you follow the safe operating procedure?” you’ll

inquire, “What barriers are holding you back from following the safe operating procedure?”

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