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The limits of compassion don't add up

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One hopes, as we mature and gain experience with life, that our process of decision-making will mature as well. I'd like to think we learn to reason more clearly, to better evaluate the pros, the cons and the merits of issues we face day to day.

It's probably wishful thinking, grounded more in emotion than reason, cautions researcher Paul Slovic. It's thinking that often doesn't add up.

It's not that we can't do the math when we're talking apples and oranges. When filling a grocery basket we understand that if one orange is priced at 50 cents, two will be valued at a dollar. Twice the cost of one.

But when the items we're counting are human lives, the math goes wrong, Slovic says, a research psychologist and University of Oregon professor who has studied human-decision making for six decades.

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What he has learned motivates him, at age 80, to get up each day and head to his office at Decision Research in downtown Eugene.

"What keeps me going is that, after almost 60 years of research, I have learned some things that appear to be vital to survival and well-being in this complex and dangerous world we live in," he says.

"What I am trying to do is bring awareness to the strange ways our minds work."

Most strange to Slovic is our nonrational thinking when making decisions about human lives. One and one don't total two in the arithmetic of compassion.

"There is no constant value to a human life," he explains. "If it's one life, cost is no object — we'll go all out to rescue a single hiker stranded after a fall on Mount Hood, for example.

"That level of concern should increase every time an additional person is lost or found at risk, but it doesn't. If there are 67 people at risk, and then you add one more so there are 68 people at risk, there is no increase in the sense of risk or concern," he says, citing studies of hypothetical tragedies.

Slovic calls it “psychic numbing” or “compassion collapse” — the emotional shutdown that arises from a sense of helplessness as the number of victims in a tragedy grows. It leads us to inaccurate conclusions.

“It’s a feeling that you can’t do any good, even though you can do good,” he says. “Even partial solutions save whole lives”

Slovic arrived in Eugene in 1964 with a fresh doctorate degree from the University of Michigan and an invitation from psychologist Lew Goldberg to join the research team at Oregon Research Institute, founded in 1960.

He and his wife, Roz, settled into the community with three young children and later adopted a fourth child.

In 1976, Slovic teamed up with researchers Baruch Fischhoff and Sarah Lichtenstein to form Decision Research, a separate research group focused on issues of risk, benefit and choice. Today he works in the same office, the last of the founders collaborating now with a team of younger researchers.

I have gone to his office to learn about the group’s investigations after reading his research on psychic numbing cited in national news coverage of last month’s deadly shooting at a high school in Parkland, Fla.

In his office, data from 59 years of research surround us, piled to the ceiling in files that line two walls and spill out along a hallway. The boxes hold statistics that began as inquiry and burgeoned into a mission.

He began, years ago, looking at decisions based on risks and benefits in gambling bets. That led to studies of gambles made in choosing health insurance coverage. Eventually, questions moved from personal decisions to societal decisions about the value of human life.

Slovic reaches for a notepad and draws a graph to illustrate what drives him now. He’s charting numbers of people at risk on one axis and emotional concern on another, stretching an arc between them to illustrate what happens when numbers of victims climb in a tragic event.

The line climbs sharply at the first. Then, as of the number of victims increases, the arc levels

out.

“It’s nonrational,” he says. “When the feeling system tries to do arithmetic, it gets it all wrong. One plus one does not equal two in helping others. Where numbers are great, we are underreacting. We are not consistent with how we would react to an individual at risk.”

One death is a tragedy; the number of people killed in mass shootings since 2012 when a gunman walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., is a statistic.

When he talks of human lives, Slovic’s voice becomes urgent. The findings sit on his conscience like a burden. He wants us to fight the numbing that skews our thinking in the face of human danger and suffering.

It’s heavy stuff — the kind that explains why Slovic heads to the University of Oregon track most lunch hours for a head-clearing workout with a loose collection of runners who call themselves the Noon Group.

He began running with the group in 1973 and now ranks as senior member. These days he’s content with two to four miles, but as summer approaches the distance will stretch in preparation for the coming Butte to Butte race.

He plans to be at the starting line, just as he was in 1973, ready to “Storm the Butte” in the run that launched Eugene’s annual July Fourth road race 45 years ago.

The runs are a break in 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. workdays with a core of researchers who dissect the idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies of human decision-making, funded by grants from the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health and the Transportation Security Administration.

“One of the things we have learned is why we underreact to problems in the world where the consequences are great,” he says. “We found that when you see or read about some horror, people need to have a way to respond.

“If you don’t see an avenue to do anything, you turn off.”

In response to that need, Slovic and associates developed a website, [arithmeticofcompassion.com](#).

sion.org, with a "Take Action" section.

He's encouraged that perhaps we're reaching a cultural tipping point with more people taking action, raising calls of "enough" against sexual abuse and school shootings.

The #MeToo movement jolted us into awareness of injustices we overlooked for years, he says. Impassioned demands from classmates of students gunned down in Florida are rallying national protests and demonstrations, posing questions of human values.

"Who are we? Are we people who value life or people who turn our backs?" Slovic asks.

"I believe we truly do care about individuals, but we are misguided by faulty thinking. If we trust our intuitive decisions, we are going to make mistakes.

"We need to use parts of the brain that can add."

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