

If you do not protect yourself from harm, do you bear some responsibility for that harm?

Supposing you are confronted with a situation that will result in harm to you, and you do nothing. Are you partially to blame for the harmful consequences? Most people say yes, and that seems reasonable.

However, all the blame for the injury does not fall on the victim. Consider the law. The law doesn't assign blame to a victim and relieve blame from the perpetrator. While this could be complicated depending on the situation, according to the law, if you do harm, particularly if it is intended, then you are culpable. The perpetrator suffers the punishment of the law regardless of the lack of protective actions of the victim.

An ethical perspective can provide a view that is somewhat different from the law. It seems that if a victim is fully able to protect himself/herself, and if it is truly that simple with no extenuating circumstances, then he/she bears some responsibility for the ensuing harm. But the perpetrator still bears major responsibility for that harm. If you harm someone, then an ethical debt has been incurred.

Related to this is the observation that many people "freeze up" (like a deer in head lights) in response to an unexpected and stressful experience. Scientifically, this has been called "tonic immobility." Tonic immobility is an automatic response wherein the body freezes in situations that provoke extreme fear. It is an involuntary response and its most marked characteristic is muscular (and emotional?) paralysis and inaction. It has been well studied in animals and is believed to occur in humans (Biol Psychol. Vol 88, pp 13-19, 2011). It is very possible that under certain stressful circumstances, the lack of self-protective actions could be due to such an immobilizing reaction or something similar. Shock and surprise are factors. Overall, in the context of this essay, this reaction, where appropriate, would further relieve the victim of blame.

Consider this. Mr. Vic, a successful professional, is accused of an ethical violation which, amazingly he did not commit. Nevertheless, the accusation is accompanied by very strong anger, social rejection, and damage of reputation. Even though he is innocent, and some people know it, he is still vigorously and viscerally attacked. Moreover, he is told that if he tries to retaliate or take legal action against his attackers, it will only be worse for him. Mr. Vic is so totally shaken by this unimaginable situation, he can barely function. He is nearly mute for days. Worse yet, his colleagues who know the reality of the situation, are frightened by the vicious attack and are afraid to stand up and support him. Mr. Vic is afraid and unable to do anything, and he can only endure the attacks, almost as though he was paralyzed. His inaction unfortunately convinces others that he must therefore be guilty; he was not stopping the attacks so he must be guilty. Mr. Vic survives although it takes many years for his reputation to regain a reasonable status and some feel he has been damaged emotionally. And the whole time, the document existed in the public domain indicating his innocence. It hardly needs explanation that his attackers are guilty of slander, bullying, and cruelty even though he wasn't able to stop them. What is required of the attackers in terms of ethical action and remediation?