

HEROES — WHAT MAKES THEM TICK?

■ BY SARAH HAFIZAH
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This is the first instalment of a three-part series on heroic acts.

Heroes — we've heard and read about them, but what makes them tick? What makes an ordinary person put aside their safety for others?

Now imagine having a loved one, be it a relative, a spouse, a parent or child, being in a life-threatening situation such as a car accident or trapped in a burning house.

It may seem like a no-brainer and an easy decision to make when it comes to the question of whether or not we, as regular human beings, are willing to go to lengths to put ourselves in danger to save the life of a loved one.

But what if the said person in trouble is a stranger? We know that this has not stopped people from stepping up and going the extra mile to save a person's life. But why?

According to a medical lecturer and psychologist from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas), Dr Bernard Ting, this hinges on a few factors.

Scientific explanations show that individuals may be motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors when it comes to helping others or doing

heroic acts in the event of an emergency or incident, he said.

Dr Ting elaborated that being kind and doing good to others are values that have been imparted to individuals since a young age, be it from parents or teachers.

In explaining this, he said intrinsic factor means the individual's personality, values, self-efficacy, skills, attitude and perceived behavioural control among others, while extrinsic factors can be driven by the environment and other reinforcements.

"We live in a world which comprises different communities so no man is an island. If we wish to get help from others, we should do the same to others.

"In general, when we do something good to others it gives us a sense of purpose. It does not only make others feel good, but it could also help us to feel happier and promote good mental health," he explained.

Past studies, he said, have revealed that kindness could help in releasing a hormone called oxytocin which is cardioprotective, meaning serving to protect the heart, especially from heart disease.



DR Ting

Oxytocin is sometimes referred to as the 'love hormone' which has physical and psychological effects including social behaviour and emotion.

As such, he said the rewarding feeling that often comes after doing a good deed also plays a crucial role in motivating a person to take courage in emergencies.

"A Swedish proverb says that shared joy is a double joy while shared sorrow is half a sorrow. Most people feel happy when they show kind gestures to others as it helps to calm our mood, reduce stress, and also bring meaning to our life," he explained.

When asked about what motivates an individual to help strangers in the event of an emergency, he said it depends on one's intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

"An individual is more likely to carry out an act when he believes that he can do so. For instance, a trained first aid provider is more comfortable doing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if he is well trained.

"Of course, past positive experiences may boost one's confidence level. Sometimes, it requires one person in the crowd to initiate the kind gesture to get the ripple effect to make others more willing to help in the event of an emergency," he added.

On the effects of bystanders in the event of an incident, Dr Ting said people may be reluctant to help when they are uncertain about potential consequences.

In saying this, he pointed out that the fear of being accused of causing unwanted outcomes to the victims does contribute to the bystander effect.

The bystander effect is a social psychological theory which states that people are less likely to offer help to a victim when there are others present.

For instance, this phenomenon often occurs in the event of an emergency or incident in which observers are more likely to take action if there are a few or no other witnesses

around.

"This happens especially when many bystanders like to record videos on how another individual helps the victim. It could become evidence to get the helper into trouble and be solely responsible for the outcome.

"Bystanders tend to have a sense of diffuse responsibility. Diffusion of responsibility refers to how a person does not feel responsible for helping someone if several others are also present, seeing as the responsibility is distributed among those who are present.

"If we encounter a crisis, we could take the lead and delegate someone in the crowd to help in different ways.

"For example, when there is a motor vehicle accident, you can get one to control the traffic, one to call for an ambulance, one to call for the traffic police and some may move the victims to a safer place while waiting for help to arrive," he explained.

He added that social media plays a big role as well in educating the public to practice one's natural altruism and give compliments to those who are willing to step out to help others.

THE rewarding feeling that often comes after doing a good deed also plays a crucial role in motivating a person to take courage in emergencies.



WOULD you be willing to put your life on the line for a stranger?



KHIRUDIN



A boy handles a fire hose under the supervision of a fireman. Photos: Ghazali Bujang

Spontaneous heroes

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE RISK THEIR LIVES TO SAVE STRANGERS?

■BY SARAH HAFIZAH CHANDRA & CLEMENT ERIK WONG

This is the second instalment of a three-part series on heroic acts.

THERE are countless stories about ordinary people who, in certain extreme conditions or situations, performed heroic acts. For their extraordinary, brave and usually selfless acts, should these heroes be given recognition or not? Fire and Rescue Department director Khirudin Drahman thinks they should be rewarded. They deserve it, he said.

To him it is indeed exceptional for ordinary persons to put their own lives at risk such as when saving someone from death or extreme danger.

Knowing this, his department is going beyond its role of putting out fires and helping people who cannot help themselves in times of trouble. The department is now focusing on educating the community on lifesaving; not deliberately aiming to produce heroes but to make people competent enough to save themselves or others whenever, wherever their skills are called for.

The five phases of incident

Life is full of incidents, so understanding the nature of an incident is pertinent as it is the basis of success of a rescue effort, prevention of extensive damage, or saving lives.

A typical incident has five degrees of severity — minor, major, crisis, disaster, and catastrophe.

Khirudin explained that an

incident can escalate to the next and subsequent phases if it is not handled or settled properly.

As the first phase is the most crucial, understand the nature of an incident and how it can get worse if not managed in the correct manner.

"Regrettably there were incidents in which the public did not help immediately. And there were people who chose to use their smartphones to record the incident, which was not helpful at all.

"In this type of situation, a minor incident can escalate into a major one. Without intervention it develops into a crisis, then a disaster and lastly a catastrophe," Khirudin explained.

Early intervention and its importance

There are two key principles when it comes to early intervention. If an incident is life-threatening, the first five minutes are crucial and the golden hour rule must apply immediately. Universally, firefighters know this.

In trauma or emergency care the term golden hour suggests that an injured or sick person must receive immediate treatment within the first 60 minutes from the time of injury or appearance of symptoms.

Khirudin said if victims can be given immediate and proper treatment, it will increase the chances of survival and reduce the risk of long-term complications significantly.

"When lives are at stake, efforts in the first five minutes and the

application of the golden rule are imperative to ensure success of a rescue mission. However, it is sad that due to the Covid-19 pandemic people might be hesitant to help others for fear of being infected.

"For example, in the event of a fire or road accident, if you can react correctly in five minutes you can prevent problems from escalating," said Khirudin.

On what one should do to intervene early in an incident, Khirudin said it depends on one's capabilities.

For one thing, knowledge is pertinent as it can and will influence one's action and contribute to the ability to intervene successfully.

Another thing, knowing oneself (one's talents and weaknesses) is very important when it comes to determining whether one would be helpful in early intervention.

"Sun Tzu, a great general, military strategist, writer and philosopher of ancient China, said if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. This is applicable to the efforts of early intervention in the event of an emergency.

"We must know whether we are capable or knowledgeable enough to help. As for the enemy, we must know what we are dealing with. For example, is it a fire or a life-threatening situation that requires medical assistance?

"Say, if you don't know basic first aid, you cannot simply do a cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) on a victim. If it is done incorrectly there are various risks such as breaking the victim's ribs," he explained.

Moreover, it is also important to know one's surroundings and the things or equipment that can be used in early intervention efforts.

"In a fire incident, say, at a utility company's power plant in Sejingkat, the workers know what equipment they need and where to get them. Without any hesitation, they attack the fire and prevent it from escalating," he said.

With over 32 years in the field, Khirudin has concluded from experience and observance that heroic acts and moments of heroism always happen spontaneously.

"From my interviews with people who had saved the lives of others, I found that they were unsure what caused them to act; to risk their own lives for strangers. They did not think that they were brave or something.

"Personally, I believe that these instances of heroism were acts of God. The majority of the heroes said that they happened to be at the right place at the right time, and they could not explain why they acted the way they did," he said.

Recognition for heroic acts

Khirudin is delighted each time he gets to give his department's official recognition to those who had put themselves in tough situations to save someone else's life.

Not everyone who is said to have done heroic acts gets to receive recognition. It takes more than word of mouth for someone to be deemed eligible to receive a 'Bomba Hero' certificate.

To be considered a hero, a person

must fulfil certain criteria when helping victims in an emergency situation. Assessments are made based on information received from eye and ear witnesses.

"We want to make sure that awards are given on merit, so we always refer to reports from operations commanders and the words of witnesses.

"We investigate and verify all cases involving early intervention by concerned bystanders. The last thing we want is for the people to doubt the credibility of an award. I believe that so far, all the awards were given to deserving persons," Khirudin explained.

Brain is more important than brawn

Since he became director in October of 2018, Khirudin said he has always made efforts to educate the public on personal and community security and safety, especially with regards to fires, not just in urban centres but also in rural Sarawak.

In emphasising the importance of having fire-related knowledge and firefighting skills, the department always encourage people to intervene as early as possible because fires spread fast. To do this, having knowledge and skills is more important than having courage or brute physical abilities.

"Knowledge in early intervention is more important than willingness to try. We must have the knowledge and the right attitude along with having basic skills in handling a certain situation.

"In these critical situations, we have to understand that every decision we make on the spot can either make or break our attempt to save someone's life.

"We must know what we are doing and how to do it before taking any action during any incidents to avoid unnecessary complications," said Khirudin.

The department's educational approaches have been implemented throughout the nation since 1984 by the Bomba Cadet which has been training young people such as students.

Currently, at the state level, the department is planning to release a pocket guide on emergencies to be disseminated to food delivery riders in the first stage of implementation.

"These riders are everywhere nowadays. We want them to be safe, but for those who have accidents, we want them to survive, hopefully with the help of members of the public who have proper knowledge to take early interventions.

"The information in the pocket guide will also be in digital form for circulation on our social media pages," said Khirudin.



■ BY SARAH HAFIZAH CHANDRA
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This year, the state Fire and Rescue Department honours 18 individuals by giving them awards for their heroism.

UNLIKE superheroes in comic books or movies, ordinary people do not deliberately go about saving the day or the lives of others. This makes it the more amazing when they perform heroic acts. It blows the mind to try to contemplate why and what makes these unwitting heroes go into action despite having no time to weigh the risks involved.

It is for this reason that the state Fire and Rescue Department director, Khirudin Drahman, believes that heroic acts deserve public recognition and positive reinforcement.

This is where the Bomba Hero Award fits in. It is bestowed upon those who show bravery and courage in helping others in emergencies.

This year, 18 individuals received the Bomba Hero Awards, compared to 25 last year. Together with a certificate, the recipients also received a fire extinguisher and fire safety brochure as symbolic recognition rather than outright material or monetary rewards.

Help with sincerity

Jamal Ahmad and Suzana Drahman, a pair of husband and wife received the Bomba Hero Award in recognition of their roles in helping a family whose car had gone off the road and into a water-logged ditch at Jalan Camar in Petra Jaya, Kuching.

Jamal recalled that several other people had already stopped to help the victims — two adults and two children.

Speaking from experience, Jamal, a 39-year-old tally clerk working at Kuching Port, said it was important to have a proper sense of humanity and selflessness to be of service to others.

UNWITTING THEY ARE BUT HEROES NONETHELESS



JAMAL (right) receives the Bomba Hero Award from Khirudin.



SUZANA (right) also receives her award from Khirudin.



MOHAMAD (right) receives a fire extinguisher together with his award.



ABDULLAH Kassim (right) gets an award for a heroic act.

"When we help people who are in need, especially in the event of an emergency, I believe it is important to be sincere and help from the heart.

"It is not right to help with an expectation of getting something in return. I believe that a simple 'thank you is more than sufficient,'" he said.

His 39-year-old wife who is a preschool assistant said it was her first time helping in an emergency.

Having learned from that incident, she said that one should always pay attention to one's surroundings to be prepared and not get overwhelmed when something untoward or unexpected happened.

"My husband has had a bit of experience as he had helped during fire incidents in his village, Kampung Bintawa Tengah.

"Even though I had no experience or knowledge on first aid, I knew that the most important thing was to ensure that the victims were safe while waiting for firemen, police or medics to arrive," she said.

Be a helper, not an observer

Another award recipient, Mohamad Khairul, 32, a food delivery rider who stumbled upon a scene of an accident while carrying out his last order of the day. Upon reaching the

site of the incident, the people who were already there asked if he could assist.

He remembered hearing their woes and wasted no time by jumping into the monsoon ditch to help the victims get out of the car. He was the first person to jump.

He is a good swimmer so he was not too concerned about the water in the ditch. He also had prior experience helping during emergencies.

"After I jumped in, several others followed suit and stopped the car from moving further and sinking deeper into the water.

"I immediately noticed two children were in the car, so I got

them out first before helping the driver and an elderly lady.

"Firemen arrived soon after we got all four victims out safely. That was a huge relief," he said.

When asked what he learned from the experience, Mohamad instead expressed a hope that people would always look out for one another and help whenever the situation permits, and especially during an emergency.

"I urge everyone not to be an observer during an emergency. If you are an able-bodied person, just help. If you can't or you won't for whatever reason, the least you can do is refrain from taking pictures or videos of an emergency such as a fire or road accident," he said.

Talk less, act fast

Abdullah Kassim, 67, said that it is crucial to jump into action during an emergency. Helping should be instinctive.

"If you spend time thinking, even for a few seconds, it might be too late. I say, jump to it!" he said.

In saying this, he pointed out that all forms of help are crucial regardless of the nature of an emergency or incident.

Similar to Mohamad, the pensioner knows how to swim, thus he too jumped into the ditch to get the victims out of their vehicle.

"When I saw the car in the ditch, I immediately decided to help without giving much thought to the risks to my safety.

"I knew that the most important thing to do was to get the victims out safely. If we had not worked hard and fast, the car would have gone under seven feet deep of water. Even now I shudder to think about the fate of the victims had nobody been there to help them," he said.

He was thankful that the victims miraculously survived and did not sustain serious injuries.

"It was my second time in such an emergency. I say, in an emergency, bystanders and others who happen to be close by must do their best to help instead of waiting for someone else to take action," he said.