

GUEST ESSAY

Why People Fail to Notice Horrors Around Them

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The miraculous history of our species is peppered with dark stories of oppression, tyranny, bloody wars, savagery, murder and genocide. When looking back, we are often baffled and ask: Why weren't the horrors halted earlier? How could people have lived with them?

The full picture is immensely complicated. But a significant part of it points to the rules that govern the operations of the human brain.

Extreme political movements, as well as deadly conflicts, often escalate slowly. When threats start small and increase gradually, they end up eliciting a weaker emotional reaction, less resistance and more acceptance than they would otherwise. The slow increase allows larger and larger horrors to play out in broad daylight — taken for granted, seen as ordinary.

One of us is a neuroscientist; the other is a law professor. From our different fields, we have come to believe that it is not possible to understand the current period — and the shifts in what counts as normal — without appreciating why and how people do not notice so much of what we live with.

The underlying reason is a pivotal biological feature of our brain: habituation, or our tendency to respond less and less to things that are constant or that change slowly. You enter a cafe filled with the smell of coffee and at first the smell is overwhelming, but no more than 20 minutes go by and you cannot smell it any longer. This is because your olfactory neurons stop firing in response to a now-familiar odor.

Similarly, you stop hearing the persistent buzz of an air-conditioner because your brain filters out background noise. Your brain cares about what recently changed, not about what remained the same.

Habituation is one of our most basic biological characteristics — something that we two-legged, bigheaded creatures share with other animals on earth, including apes, elephants, dogs, birds, frogs, fish and rats. Human beings also habituate to complex social circumstances such as war, corruption, discrimination, oppression, widespread misinformation and extremism. Habituation does not only result in a reduced tendency to notice and react to grossly immoral deeds around us; it also increases the likelihood that we will engage in them ourselves.

A study conducted in Dr. Sharot's lab, for example, showed that people habituate to their own dishonesty. In the study, volunteers were given the opportunity to lie repeatedly to gain money at the expense of another person. All the while, their brain activity was recorded.

The volunteers started with relatively small lies, cheating only to win a few more cents. But slowly over the course of the experiment the lies became bigger in order to obtain escalating dollar amounts.

At first, parts of the brain that signal emotion responded strongly in the volunteers when they lied, suggesting that people were uncomfortable with their own dishonesty. But with each additional lie, the emotional response in the brain was reduced; people habituated. Without the negative feeling, there was nothing to curb dishonesty, so people lied more and more.

It's not only small acts of dishonesty to which we habituate. Consider a famous study conducted in the early 1960s by the psychologist Stanley Milgram. The motivation for this experiment was to understand the rise of authoritarianism, as it happened in Germany before and during World War II.

Milgram wanted to study obedience and understand how ordinary people could participate in horrible acts. His experiments do tell us about obedience, but intentionally or unintentionally, Milgram was also studying habituation.

He showed that regular citizens are willing to administer electric shocks — even those that appear to be extremely painful — to others when told to do so by an authority figure. But Milgram's careful design was crucial. Milgram's volunteers were asked to deliver small shocks at first and then only very slowly, and by increments, to ramp up the voltage to what seemed to be high levels.

By asking the volunteers to increase the voltage one step at a time, Milgram was inducing emotional habituation. The volunteers may have felt some guilt at the beginning, but because the shocks increased by small increments, any feelings of guilt were likely less intense than they would otherwise have been. By the time the volunteers reached the high voltage, many of them appeared to have habituated to the idea of causing dreadful pain to another human being. It is fair to doubt whether so many of the volunteers would have complied if the high-voltage shock was the first that they were asked to administer.

Milgram's study tells us something important about behavior outside the laboratory, and about how people can get used to not only lying and cruelty, but also horrors — including their own. For Milton Mayer's staggering book about the rise of Nazism, for example, a man who lived in Germany at the time described the regime to the author: "Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse."

He added: "If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes, millions would have been sufficiently shocked. ... But of course this isn't the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next."

You might now be thinking about alarming developments in the United States and Europe. If so, you are entirely right to do so.

Though more slowly than we may like, resistance efforts often do emerge in response to injustice or horror; consider the French Resistance, the civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. These movements tend to be initiated by what might be called "dishabituation entrepreneurs."

Those are people who have not habituated to the evils of their society; they both see the wrongdoing for what it is and call it out to cause dishabituation in others. Often, dishabituation entrepreneurs are individuals who experience the horror or discrimination themselves — but refuse to get used to it. Malala Yousafzai, Mohandas Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Gloria Steinem, Harvey Milk and Nelson Mandela are powerful examples who were able to get others to dishabituate. There are also dishabituation entrepreneurs who were not themselves victims, but who notice the suffering of others and speak out or act. William Lloyd Garrison, Eleanor Roosevelt and Peter Singer are examples.

Lesser-known examples are all around us; they might be in your family, your neighborhood or your workplace.

But can dishabituation entrepreneurs be produced? We think so. A key is what John Stuart Mill once described as "experiments of living." Mill emphasized the importance of seeing one's beliefs, values, norms and situations from a distance, to be able to evaluate them and perhaps learn that a change would be desirable. To do so we need to diversify our experiences.

If people intentionally expose themselves to different cultures, different practices and different forms of government, the injustices around them may no longer seem natural and inevitable.

By visiting a foreign country, for example, people may increase the chances of becoming dishabituated to their own situation — they can obtain a critical distance from the known and familiar and see it afresh. Something similar may happen by interacting with people with diverse experiences or submerging oneself in different points of view through works of art (novels, poetry, theater, film). Once cruelty or oppression is highlighted and made new, or once you experience, see or merely imagine a reality free of them, you might be startled by what is happening, right now, at home.

In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel: "We must learn how to be surprised, not to adjust ourselves." We can learn to become surprised by corruption, deaths from opioids, abuse of animals in food production or gun violence. After learning about how people habituate, more of us may be able to follow Heschel's advice — to detect and focus on not-so-great, or even terrible, features of our lives and societies that we have come to take for granted.

Tali Sharot and Cass R. Sunstein are the authors of "Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There."

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