

Emergency situations amplify individual tendencies to behave egoistically or prosocially

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In emergency situations do people think solely of themselves? In a study published in *Scientific Reports*, researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development have shown that readiness to help depends heavily on personality. The results show that most people would help

others in emergency situations, some of them even more so than in harmless everyday situations.

It is said that people show their true colours in times of adversity. In a recently published study, scientists at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development have found that extreme conditions bring out the good in people as well as the bad. In their experiments, prosocial and altruistic people in particular often helped others even more in an emergency situation than in a relaxed and non-threatening situation, whereas selfish participants became less cooperative. "Emergency situations seem to amplify people's natural tendency to cooperate," says Mehdi Moussaïd, researcher in the Center for Adaptive Rationality at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development.

The researchers invited 104 participants act out scenarios in a computer [game](#) that they developed specifically for the experiment. In this "help-or-escape dilemma game," participants under time and monetary pressure had to decide whether they were willing to risk taking time to help others before reaching their goal or saving themselves in two different situations—one everyday and one emergency situation. After the game, the researchers measured participants' social value orientation—that is, their concern for others—and categorized them as having a prosocial or individualistic profile.

The first scenario was an everyday situation in a train station. The players' goal was to catch a train. The time available for the game was 60 seconds. Participants who succeeded in catching the train won a bonus of 1 euro; there was no penalty in case of failure. On their way to the platform, the participants met eight other travelers who each needed help finding their own train. Participants chose between a button to help or a button to end the game ("escape"), which in reality would have corresponded to heading directly to the train platform. Whether they would succeed in catching their train in time, however, was determined

at random by the computer, depending on the point at which participants left the game. Ending the game early increased the chances of success. The more people they helped and the more time elapsed, the lower the participants' chances of winning the game.

The second scenario was an emergency situation in a [train station](#). After an explosion, participants had to leave the building as quickly as possible. This time, they only had 15 seconds to escape, and they risked losing 4 euros if they didn't make it out of the building in time. There was no bonus in case of success. To emphasize the alarming nature of the situation, the researchers added a red blinking frame to the computer screen. Here again, participants encountered eight other travelers who were each in need of help, and the procedure was otherwise the same as in the first scenario.

Overall, participants helped others less in the emergency situation because of the time pressure they were under. However, when the researchers focused on individual participants, they found that many of those categorized as prosocial were more helpful in the emergency situation: 44% of them were more ready to help in the emergency than in the everyday situation. The opposite was true of [participants](#) categorized as individualistic, 52% of whom reduced their cooperative behavior in the emergency situation.

"Our game-based approach offers a new way of studying human cooperation and could help authorities to manage crowd behaviors during mass emergencies," says Mehdi Moussaïd.

More information: Mehdi Moussaïd et al. Patterns of cooperation during collective emergencies in the help-or-escape social dilemma, *Scientific Reports* (2016). [DOI: 10.1038/srep33417](https://doi.org/10.1038/srep33417)

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