

Injustice in a Just World
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The opposite of our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, is the just world hypothesis.

The just world hypothesis is very simple. Basically, the idea is that people get what they deserve.

On the surface, it doesn't sound menacing, but in practice, what the just world hypothesis suggests is, "If someone is suffering, it is because they are a bad person."

This concept is everywhere. Victim-blaming sexual assault victims is a good example. Subconsciously, we think, 'people get what they deserve, and this person has been sexually assaulted, which is bad, so they must have done something bad to deserve it.' If she had just worn different clothing, if ey had just avoided that part of town, if he had just not provoked her, they wouldn't have gotten hurt.

The JWH is insidious, and though it seems small, it's a very dangerous belief. I will look at two ways the Just World Hypothesis convinces us that we do not have inherent worth and dignity, and two results of this belief, and then I will talk about how to fight against those arguments. Then, I will talk about why the Just World Hypothesis exists, and why it's important to work against it.

First, the Just World Hypothesis is an attractive idea, because it's comforting to think that people get what they deserve. If someone deserves their suffering, we have no responsibility to help them, or to put ourselves in their place.

Going into the world with our eyes open to suffering is like walking into a house that hasn't been cleaned in twenty years with a feather duster. It's overwhelming. Taking responsibility for any of the suffering of the world is deeply painful, and often we just don't have time or energy to care that deeply.

Second, the JWH is useful to us, because the world of injustice is a terrifying one. If our actions cannot stop other people from hurting us, then what *is* preventing us from getting hurt? The world of injustice means we're vulnerable, no matter what we do. We could get sick. We could be raped. Our house could burn down, even though we haven't done anything wrong. The Just World Hypothesis gives us an illusion of safety.

Once we are convinced, there's a flip side to this illusion of safety. If you *are* suffering, then you must be a bad person. Diet culture runs on this notion. You didn't eat the right thing, and so you should buy this gym membership, and this weight loss program, and stay quiet and ashamed and focused on your own life.

You took the wrong action, and that means now you are a wrong person. Or, alternatively, you did something good, and now you deserve a reward. You completed the chapter, so now you get to eat a cupcake. Our worth and our happiness are conditional.

This thought pattern prevents us from looking around, and from connecting with other people. Conditional self-worth will always, eventually, result in shame, because none of us make the right decisions all of the time. And shame is isolating, because it makes you afraid that other people will judge you in the way you're judging yourself.

So now that I've talked a little about the justifications and outcomes of the just world hypothesis, let's talk about ways to fight back against it.

First: to recap, the Just World hypothesis is valuable for us, because it allows us to ignore the overwhelming amount of suffering in the world. What can we do instead?

Instead of closing ourselves off, and insisting that anyone we see who is suffering deserves it, let us try to work together to tackle one small part of what we can see.

For me, this looks like listening to a friend when I notice that they are hurting. It looks like doing the dishes without being asked. It looks like hugging a homeless person, giving them my change, and listening to their story. My contribution alone is very small, but together, these things add up. Together, we fight back against the tide.

No one can fix all the suffering in the world alone. When you don't have the energy or the time to grieve the world's pain, give yourself space, and have faith that those around you are doing what they can. And if you can do one small thing, instead of feeling sad that it isn't perfect, do that one small thing.

Second, the Just World Hypothesis is valuable because it convinces us that we are safe from danger, because we are good people who do not *deserve* to experience school shootings, or natural disasters, or chronic illness. What can we believe instead?

Replace this illusion of safety with faith in other people. Things *will* go wrong, because the world is not just, but every one of us has a core of strength and beauty and love, and together, we can find a way to move forward with any disaster the world throws at us. We can come together to prevent school shootings, to rebuild houses after natural disasters, to take care of each other no matter how ill we become. Instead of pretending that bad things won't ever happen, practice picking yourself back up.

Next, how do we fight the results of the JWH, the two-pronged idea that if we do good, we *are* good, but if we do badly, or make a mistake, we are bad?

For me, this is one of the hardest steps to take. Shame and guilt have ground themselves into my pores. I will twist myself into knots trying to avoid them.

But here is what I believe: when you are suffering, ask for help. When you feel ashamed, tell someone. When you have made a mistake, make something new.

Our shame is most powerful in the dark, where it can fester and become impossibly large and impossibly painful. For me, ignoring something I feel ashamed about is a vicious cycle. The avoidance itself is another thing to be ashamed of.

Again, the solution is working together, and taking whatever small step you can, even if it does not feel like enough. In addition, do not wait to do things that make you happy. You don't need an excuse. You don't need to be perfect to give yourself rewards. You deserve nice things, no matter what mistakes you have made.

Here are a few practical first steps that sometimes help me:

-Go for a walk, or go exercise. Get out of your head.

-Find someplace new that you haven't seen before.

-Doodle something. Cook something. Throw a lump of clay at the ground. Make something, even if it's not good.

-When you talk to people, try to focus on their actions, and how their actions made you feel, instead of judging who they are as a person.

-When you think about yourself, focus on your actions, and how they made you feel, instead of judging who you are as a person.

-Talk to someone you haven't seen in a while.

-Take a risk.

-When you feel something, shame or fear or anger or pain or sadness or love or happiness or pure excitement, let yourself feel it, and let yourself express that feeling. If you feel like crying, let the tears come. If you feel like dancing, dance. Make a world where you are allowed to feel what you feel.

-Let yourself be imperfect.

So! To return to the main point, the Just World Hypothesis is the idea that if someone is suffering, they deserve it. We use it to feel safe, and to avoid the crushing responsibility of the world. It makes us believe that our actions determine our worth, which is the opposite of our first principle: the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

But the JWH did not show up out of nowhere. It's rooted in our culture, and it is a tool.

The JWH benefits all of us in one way or another. We're a relatively privileged group, and privilege is enforced by a culture in which those who have privilege *deserve* their privilege.

However, we lose much more to the JWH than we gain. It cuts us off from each other. It keeps us lonely and sad and afraid. So, if the JWH is a tool, who is it a tool *for*?

If we blame those who are suffering for their own pain, or turn on ourselves for not being perfect, we are reinforcing a paradigm in which the rich and powerful stay rich and powerful.

The super rich want us divided. They want us lonely, and afraid, because if we are too busy feeling ashamed of our own mistakes, we have no time to look at the suffering of the world and demand something better. They want us cut off from one another, because together, we are much more powerful than them. They want us to believe that the world is already just, and they are the only ones who deserve that justice.

Don't let them win. Don't let the part of you that is afraid and ashamed win, either. It's never too late to get back up and try again. Just take one step. You may be in a house that hasn't been cleaned in twenty years, armed with only a feather duster, but I'm here too, and I have a broom. If you can dust off the top of the piano, I can sweep the floors. We can all move forward together.

And together, we can create a truly just world.