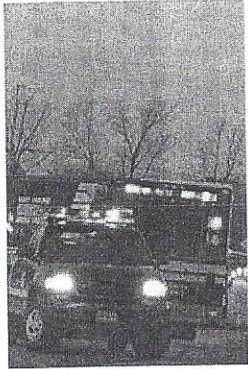


Characteristics of Heroism

What Makes a Person a Hero?

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Proper training and the ability to overcome fear are common characteristics of heroes. Image by Kenn Kiser. What makes a person a hero? Is there a hero gene? According to one recent study, the answer might rest in what type of heroism we're addressing. Researchers discovered that people who had engaged in one-time acts of bravery (like rushing into a burning building or rescuing someone from the path of an oncoming train) weren't that much different from a control group of non-heroes. People who engaged in lifelong heroism (such as professional nurses who regularly comfort the sick and dying) shared a number of important personality traits such as empathy, nurturance, and a need to live by a moral code.

"The decision to act heroically is a choice that many of us will be called upon to make at some point in time. By conceiving of heroism as a universal attribute of human nature, not as a rare feature of the few "heroic elect," heroism becomes something that seems in the range of possibilities for every person, perhaps inspiring more of us to answer that call,"

write heroism researchers Zeno Franco and Philip Zimbardo.

The psychology of heroism might not be well understood, but many experts do believe that it is possible for people to learn to be heroes. Do you have what it takes? The following are just a few of the major characteristics that researchers have ascribed to heroes.

People who become heroes tend to be concerned with the well-being of others.

According to researchers, empathy and compassion for others are key variables that contribute to heroic behavior. People who rush in to help others in the face of danger and adversity do so because they genuinely care about the safety and well-being of other people. A 2009 study found that people who have heroic tendencies also have a much higher degree of empathy. Researchers suggest that heroes aren't just compassionate and caring; they have a knack for being able to see things from the perspective of others. They can 'walk a mile in another man's shoes,' so to speak.

Heroes are competent and confident.

It takes both skill and self-confidence to rush in where others fear to tread. Researchers suggest that people who perform heroic acts tend to feel confident in themselves and their abilities. When faced with a crisis, they have an intrinsic belief that they are capable of handling the challenge and achieving success no matter what the odds. Part of this confidence might stem from above-average coping skills and abilities to manage stress.

Heroes have a strong moral compass.

According to heroism researchers Zimbardo and Franco, heroes have two essential qualities that set them apart from non-heroes: they live by their values and they are willing to endure personal risk to protect those values.

Having the right skills and training can make a difference.

Clearly, having the training or physical ability to deal with a crisis can also play a major role in whether or not people become heroes. In situations where would-be rescuers lack the know-how or sheer physical strength to make a difference, people are less likely to help or are more likely to find less direct ways to take action. And in many cases, this approach is probably best; after all, people senselessly rushing into a dangerous situation can pose even more difficulties for rescue workers.

Heroes persist, even in the face of fear.

A person who rushes into a burning building to save another person is not just extraordinarily brave; they also have an ability to overcome fear. Researchers suggest that heroic individuals are positive thinkers by nature, which contributes to their ability to look past the immediate danger of a situation and see a more optimistic outcome. In many cases, these individuals may also have a higher tolerance for risk. Plenty of caring and kind people might

shrink back in the face of danger. Those who do leap into action are typically more likely to take greater risks in multiple aspects of their lives.

Heroes keep working on their goals, even after multiple setbacks.

Persistence is another quality commonly shared by heroes. In one 2010 study, researchers found that people identified as heroes were more likely to put a positive spin on negative events. When faced with a potentially life-threatening illness, people with heroic tendencies might focus on the good that might come from the situation such as a renewed appreciation for life or an increased closeness with loved ones.

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