

# How Images Trigger Empathy

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## *The Atlantic:*

While looking back and trying to make sense of a year just ended, we often focus on its most hopeless parts, the violence and acrimony. Last year did include plenty of negativity to mourn. But it also reminded us of an important lesson about how to access our better angels. Three recent events shined a light on how empathy works—and one reason why it often does not.

The first occasion involved the Syrian civil war. Over the course of four years, more than 200,000 Syrians were killed and over 3 million fled the country seeking refuge. The war sometimes made the news, but the humanitarian disaster didn't receive much media attention, until this past September when coverage of the war and its displaced victims skyrocketed. The question of what to do with Syrian refugees, both in Europe and in America, filled front pages and presidential debates.

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People who work in the empathy business know well about the identifiable-victim effect, even if they don't use the name. Children International, for instance, has long entreated donors to "sponsor" individual kids; the youngsters get money to pay for things like medical care, while the donors get connections to the children they help—including a color photograph sent each year. Many other nonprofits recognize and take advantage of the fact that "the mind is very much geared to respond to a single person in need—whether it's ourselves or a single person in front of us," in the words of psychologist Paul Slovic.

Read the whole story: [The Atlantic](#)