

The Arithmetic of Compassion

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The New York Times:

WE all can relate to the saying “One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.” Our sympathy for suffering and loss declines precipitously when we are presented with increasing numbers of victims. In the 1950s, the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton studied survivors of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and discovered that a condition he labeled “psychic numbing” enabled them to withstand the psychological trauma of this experience.

Psychologists have since extended Dr. Lifton’s work to show how the concept of psychic numbing has implications in many other situations, such as our response to information about refugee crises, mass extinctions and climate change. This information can be deadening in its abstractness. We struggle to care when the numbers get big. The poet Zbigniew Herbert called this “the arithmetic of compassion.”

Read the whole story: [The New York Times](#)