

Causing Harm

This video introduces the general ethics concepts of harm and justification. *Causing Harm* explores the different types of harm that may be caused to people or groups and the potential reasons we may have for justifying these harms.

To gain a better understanding of when and how harms can be considered justified, watch *Systematic Moral Analysis*, which explores the moral dimensions we face when making ethical decisions.

To learn about the behavioral ethics biases that may affect our decisions to cause harm, watch *Tangible & Abstract*, *Incrementalism*, *Framing*, and *Self-serving Bias*.

The case studies covered on this page explore different types of harm that can be caused, at varying scales. “Edward Snowden: Traitor or Hero?” raises questions over whether or not Edward Snowden’s release of confidential government documents was ethically justifiable. “Patient Autonomy & Informed Consent” explores the difficult decisions involved in taking care of a patient who has been deemed legally incompetent and refuses certain types of treatment. “Cyber Harassment” examines the case of a teacher who confronts a student in class and posts a video of the confrontation online in response to that student defaming the teacher on social media. For a case study about causing harm to the environment, read “Climate Change & the Paris Deal.”

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: diffusion of responsibility, framing, incrementalism, justice, moral agent, self-serving bias, subject of moral worth, tangible & abstract, and values.

For more information on concepts covered in this and other videos, as well as activities to help think through these concepts, see Deni Elliott’s workbook *Ethical Challenges: Building an Ethics Toolkit*, available for free download at the link below. This workbook explores what ethics is and what it means to be ethical, offering readers a variety of exercises to identify their own values and reason through ethical conflicts. Discussion and exercises regarding harms and justifications may be found beginning on page 14. More information and activities on justified harm can be found in the sections that address the concept of systematic moral analysis, pages 35-44.



Discussion Questions

1. The students interviewed for this video disagree about which type of harm is the worst — physical, emotional, psychological, financial, reputational — which do you think is the worst and why?

2. Can you think of an example of when you have been harmed? Was this harm ethically justifiable? Was it not? Explain how.
3. The video claims that we should not cause harm to others unless we are willing to suffer the same harm ourselves. Do you agree?
4. In what situation(s) would you knowingly cause harm? How would the benefits outweigh the harm?
5. Do you think an institution such as a business or government can be held accountable for causing harm in the same way an individual can be? Support your position.
6. Are you supportive of governments or institutions taking actions that may cause harm to some but would likely benefit many? How is this justified? Why is it permissible?
7. Can you think of other instances when taking such actions is not ethical?

Additional Resources

Harrosh, Shlomit. 2012. "Identifying Harms." *Bioethics* 26 (9): 493-498.

Rodin, David. 2011. "Justifying Harm." *Ethics* 122 (1): 74-110.

Smilansky, Saul. 2004. "Terrorism, Justification, and Illusion." *Ethics* 114 (4): 790-805.

Transcript of Narration

Written and Narrated by:

Deni Elliott, Ph.D., M.A.

Department of Journalism & Media Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

The University of South Florida at St. Petersburg

"How can I harm thee? Let me count the ways. Physically. Psychologically or emotionally. Financially. And, I can cause you reputational harm.

Harms rarely come isolated from one another. So, let's review the categories:

Physical harm is the easiest. It can be short-term, like, oh, being shoved out of the way and into a mud puddle by someone hurrying down the street. Or it can be long-term, like being injured in a car accident by a drunken driver.

Psychological and emotional harm may not carry any visible scars. But, they are true harms. Emotional harm is the short-term version. When we feel offended or embarrassed or humiliated, it may be due to emotional harm.

Psychological harm makes us feel unsure of our worth or lose confidence in ourselves; it can result from a trauma and haunt us from that point on. The tentative child or the volatile, explosive adult may be acting from a place of psychological harm.

Financial harm is important too. If I take advantage of you being naive about investments and convince you to put your life savings into some get rich quick scheme that fails, I've caused you harm.

Last of all is reputational harm. This kind of harm has become more prevalent because of the wide reach of the Internet. Cyber-bullying has led teenagers to commit suicide; false or mean-spirited reviews have led to professional ruin for individuals and for businesses.

Now causing harm can be justified, but the harm-causing action must first meet one of the following conditions:

Number one: The person harmed gave consent. Think of someone who agrees to go through a painful surgery so that he will be healthy again. That's consent to cause harm.

Number two: The harm caused was part of the harmer's role-related responsibility. Sometimes causing justified harms is just part of the job. If a parent prevents her teenager from hanging out with friends until homework is done, she is fulfilling her role-related responsibility, no matter how much anguish she might cause her child at the moment.

Number three: A harm was caused to prevent an even greater harm to the community as a whole. For example, a government collects taxes, causing financial harm to some citizens, because without taxes the government could not provide services that benefit all citizens.

After meeting one of these conditions, an act of justified harm must also pass a publicity test. The publicity test means that we're willing for the exception to the general rule, "cause no harm," to be widely and publicly known, and applied in all similar situations. The harm-causer in this case must also be willing to acknowledge that she or he might be the one hurt in the future by the same exception.

So, maybe I can harm you in a variety of ways. But, being the ethical person that I strive to be, I won't harm you without justification. And, I won't harm you unless I am willing to explain to you and the public at large why I am doing so. And, I won't harm you without believing that you and everyone else is equally justified in causing the same kind of harm, even to me."