
TRYING TO MAKE SENSE of a tragedy

DR. BOB BAUGHER

You've heard it many times: News flash—*A man was assaulted today. According to authorities, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.*

Just look at the word *wrong* used twice in the sentence and you can definitely see that the poor fellow seemed to somehow be at fault. Why does the human mind come up with reasons to blame the victim?

A term from psychology may give us some insight into this common human failing. It's called the Just-World hypothesis and it goes like this: **People believe that it is a just world.**

What goes around comes around—what ye' sow ye' shall reap—karma—what you get you somehow deserve.

When a disturbing, senseless event takes place, our brain demands to know why. In our attempt to answer the question we have a choice: we can look at all the facts and appreciate the complexity of the factors that contributed to the event. Or, we can take the easy way out and use short cuts like the JWH.

If a woman was murdered, our brain instantly asks questions. Where was she? Was she drinking? Did she know the person? What did she do to bring this event to her? Why do people ask such questions? One line of reasoning goes something like this:

If the victim was someplace I wouldn't go, or if she did something I wouldn't do, then (here it comes) it won't happen to me.



It is a rationalization that is often used to give us a (false) sense of security. The problem with this type of thinking is that many of us have done these very things: we've been drinking, we've been out after 1 a.m., we've been in strange places, and we've done things that tick other people off. Yet, in an attempt to ease the discomfort of a tragedy, we put the memory of our own past escapades aside.

Here are a couple examples. A woman who lives 25 minutes from my house was attacked midday by a man as she pushed her daughter in a stroller. In the news report a police official stated that she and her daughter were, "Unfortunate to have been at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Walking down your street midday is the wrong place and wrong time?

On March 12, 2013, a man is golfing and is suddenly swallowed by a sinkhole. He lived, but what do we hear from a geologist who examined the site. You know the answer: "He was at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Really? The guy was just golfing.

You might be thinking, "Well, all they are really saying is that it was just bad luck and they happened to use a well-worn phrase."

This type of thinking wouldn't be so bad if people were seen as simply unlucky. But, it goes beyond that. "Wrong place" says, "You shouldn't have been there."

"Wrong time" says your timing was bad.

Put the two wrongs together and you have the potential for blaming the victim. It's very different to say, "The man was unlucky." "The woman was misfortunate." But *wrong place/wrong time* clearly puts the onus on the victim.

So, what's the lesson in all this?
Simply, do not blame the victim.

- ◆ **Keep the focus on the culprit.** "While pushing her child in a stroller today, a woman was attacked by a stranger for no apparent reason."
- ◆ **Keep the focus on the event.** "A man out golfing today survived when the green on which he was standing opened up into a sinkhole."

Your mission (should you choose to accept it) is to challenge those who would fall into the JWH trap by pointing out that the victim is blameless. Or, you could say nothing and continue to watch it happen—until, of course, when it happens to you.