

## Transforming Compassion into Action: The Heroic Imagination Project

by Mark Katz, PhD

**HOW CAN WE PREVENT** a defenseless child from being tormented by a bigger and more powerful school bully? How do we prevent a struggling child with learning, attention, or other challenges from being publicly ridiculed by fellow classmates? It takes more than compassionate understanding of the child's plight to make it stop. It takes action—and more specifically, action on the part of concerned and caring bystanders who see it happening and who know it's wrong, but who don't speak up. How can we change their behavior?

The Heroic Imagination Project, a non-profit organization located in San Francisco, California, may have the answer. The project is the brainchild of Phillip Zimbardo, PhD, whose Stanford Prison Experiment decades ago illustrated the manner in which a toxic environment can dramatically influence human behavior. In the experiment, subjects playing the role of prison guards began treating subjects playing the role of prison-

ers in unthinkable ways; so harshly in fact, the experiment had to be stopped for the protection of the participants.

Zimbardo has since turned his attention to factors that can create social environments that bring out the best in us, rather than the worst. Researchers have spent decades exploring the factors that contribute to human misbehavior, he notes, but far less attention has been paid to the factors that contribute to heroic behavior. He helped launch the Heroic Imagination Project (HIP) as a remedy.

The HIP website offers an impressive resource library of video presentations and

articles on the bystander effect, and how to overcome the forces that often prevent us from speaking out on another's behalf. Resources also include video presentations and articles on the influence of group norms on human behavior and how to break free of their influence when action is called for. Additional video presentations and articles address prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination, among other important topics. Anyone involved in bullying and stigma prevention programs will find the materials very helpful as discussion guides and to reinforce research-validated practices designed to positively change a school's social climate.

Visitors to the HIP website will also learn about the organization's efforts to weave material from their expanding resource library into a comprehensive school-based curriculum designed to enhance our "heroic imagination," and help students and others acquire the skills necessary for transforming compassion into action. HIP educational director

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Clint Wilkins says the curriculum currently focuses on three themes: Resisting Negative Social Influences, Harnessing the Power of Stories, and Initiating Positive Social Change. Each theme is comprised of several different lessons. Wilkins emphasizes that themes and lessons can be individually tailored to meet a school's particular needs.

HIP is currently piloting their curriculum with a small number of high schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. Wilkins has seen a number of students grow inspired by the heroic stories they learn about. They also quickly grasp the important human dynamics discussed in the curriculum, including blind obedience to a cruel and inhumane authority, bystander apathy and inaction, and the power of a single courageous voice in changing a school culture, and in some instances, an entire society. In the near future HIP also plans to offer workshops designed to train parents and school personnel on elements of the curriculum to help facilitate their integration into the school day.

HIP does much more than educate about the impact of bullying, prejudice, stigma, and other forms of hurtful behavior, says Wilkins. It teaches us about the role each of us has in preventing these hurtful behaviors, and the specific ways in which we can transform compassion into action. As one of the foremost social psychologists in the world, Zimbardo has been able to assemble an impressive board of advisors to help guide the project. All materials are also currently available free of charge through the HIP website.

Zimbardo believes that heroic acts are not the domain of truly exceptional human beings who possess qualities the vast majority of us are lacking. Rather, heroic acts arise out of the particular circumstances we find ourselves in and the tools we possess at the time to allow us to transform compassion into action. By giving people the tools, he believes we have it within our power to create a vast number of heroes. Zimbardo helped to create HIP for this purpose: to empower us with the tools we need to act heroically. In designing programs,

the organization draws heavily upon experts in the fields of social psychology and positive psychology. Programs are available for businesses, the military, and schools.

Email Clint Wilkins ([clint@heroicimagination.org](mailto:clint@heroicimagination.org)) to learn more about implementing one of the education programs or about HIP's outreach efforts to schools. Visit [heroicinformation.org](http://heroicinformation.org), the HIP website, for downloadable articles such as "Re-

sisting Social Influence and Persuasion" and "Understanding Heroism" or for information about current research on the nature of heroic behavior. "Heroes in waiting" who want to learn how to transform compassion into meaningful action can start by taking the Hero Pledge found on the website. HIP recommends they next take the Hero Challenge, a four-lesson online course that covers topics from its resource library on heroism. **A**

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*A clinical and consulting psychologist, Mark Katz is the director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological, and neuropsychological center located in San Diego. He is a contributing editor to Attention magazine and a member of its editorial advisory board, a former member of CHADD's professional advisory board, and a recipient of the CHADD Hall of Fame Award.*