

The Concept of Harm

All religious traditions share a commitment to harmlessness, however defined. So do professional codes of conduct, which include phrases like that attributed to the Hippocratic Oath: “First, do no harm.”

Why do we tolerate harm? Why is there so much violence? It is clear that we cannot rely on spiritual beliefs to prevent it. Part of the answer lies in our distorted view of who we are and how our universe operates, which encourages us to focus on self-interest and to live from a fear-based myth of scarcity.

The first volume in this *Enough for Us All* series, titled *Principles of Abundance for the Cosmic Citizen*, explored the meaning of “enough,” the benefits and responsibilities of being a cosmic citizen, and seven principles by which our cosmos operates (which are listed in the Preface of this volume). We will review those principles in the next chapter as they relate to harmlessness. In exploring the concept of harm, the principles that concern us most are that we are indeed all part of the same cosmic energy field (the Principle of Interconnectivity) and that we have evolved primarily through cooperation and networking (the Principle of Cooperation).

We have been shaped over the past 300 years by the mechanistic, deterministic worldview that emerged from Newtonian physics as well as by a belief that our evolutionary history was grounded in violence and competition (“survival of the fittest”). The findings of quantum physics reveal quite a different picture and one that can help us shed our mistaken identities as violent beings. But first, if we are to shift from harmfulness to harmlessness, we need to understand harm and why we indulge in it.

The Root Causes of Harmfulness

Why do people choose to behave in a harmful or violent manner? We may act harmfully out of fear, particularly a fear of scarcity or of loss. If we see life as a win-lose competition for scarce resources, then it is easy to justify any action that will make us the winner. This is an “I’ll get them before they get me” mentality.

Or we may act harmfully out of an ignorance of alternatives. If all that is modeled for us is the option of violence, then it would come as no surprise that we choose violence. Our violence may be a matter of unconscious habits or “the way it’s always been done”—as in hazing, corporal punishment, or forced sex. We may not have developed a moral compass of our own.

Or we may act harmfully because of our own sense of entitlement to have what we want when we want it. In this scenario, anyone who interferes is expendable. We explored this entitlement dynamic in some detail in *Principles of Abundance for the Cosmic Citizen*. In essence, here we choose to make ourselves feel good at the expense of others.

Or there is the issue of choice and control. Causing harm is a control strategy, not an out-of-control occurrence. Some people make choices to dissipate tension and frustration through violence rather than accepting responsibility to work through the discomfort without harming those around them.

The motivation of choice raises the matter of intention. Part of the definition of harm refers to hurt that is deliberately inflicted. Intention is tricky because we can have good intentions and yet harm others without realizing what the consequences of our actions will be.

Finally and most fundamentally, we may do harm to others in denial of our actual interconnected reality, substituting instead an “us-them” mentality that includes objectifying the other person or group. When we remember that the “other” is in a very real sense a part of ourselves—the Principle of Interconnectivity—then it is not so easy to humiliate or degrade or physically hurt them.

The Pervasiveness of Harm

Surrounded as we are by messages about the importance of harmlessness, one would think that harming another person would seldom occur. Unfortunately, we know better. Harmfulness is ubiquitous. We kill millions in wars over religious differences and territorial greed, leaving millions more scarred for life. Murders, assaults, sexual and domestic violence, and other examples of violence between humans are rampant, to say nothing of the mistreatment of animals, species extinction due to human initiatives, or damage to the environment. And, though caused unintentionally, harmful illnesses stemming from misdiagnosis or inappropriate treatment are the third leading cause of death in the United States, after heart disease and cancer. The list seems endless.

Rather than improving, our rate of violence appears to be escalating. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared that “the 20th century was one of the most violent periods in human history. An estimated 191 million people lost their lives directly or indirectly as a result of conflict, over half of whom were civilians.”

Our callousness seems to be intensifying as the amount of violence in the media, music and music videos, and video games increases exponentially. Violence generates an adrenalin rush that can fill us with excitement. How to generate a similar sense of excitement without the accompanying violence is not clear.

Recent concern regarding violence has centered around not only its quantity but also the increasing proportion of gratuitous violence—that is, violence that does not contribute to understanding a plot or to advancing a storyline. This gratuitous violence includes a rising percentage of violence depicted without moral consequences or posed as the normal solution to interpersonal difficulties, as well as the persistent linking of violence with sexual and graphic sadist imagery.

Over the years there has been debate about whether watching or listening to violence has an effect on our behavior. The evidence now appears conclusive that indeed there are negative consequences. Research indicates that viewing or listening to or acting out violence reinforces a belief that violence is the best way to resolve conflicting interests. It also creates an image of the world as a dangerous place where one must be on guard.