Introduction

Click the **NEXT** button to explore information about altruism.
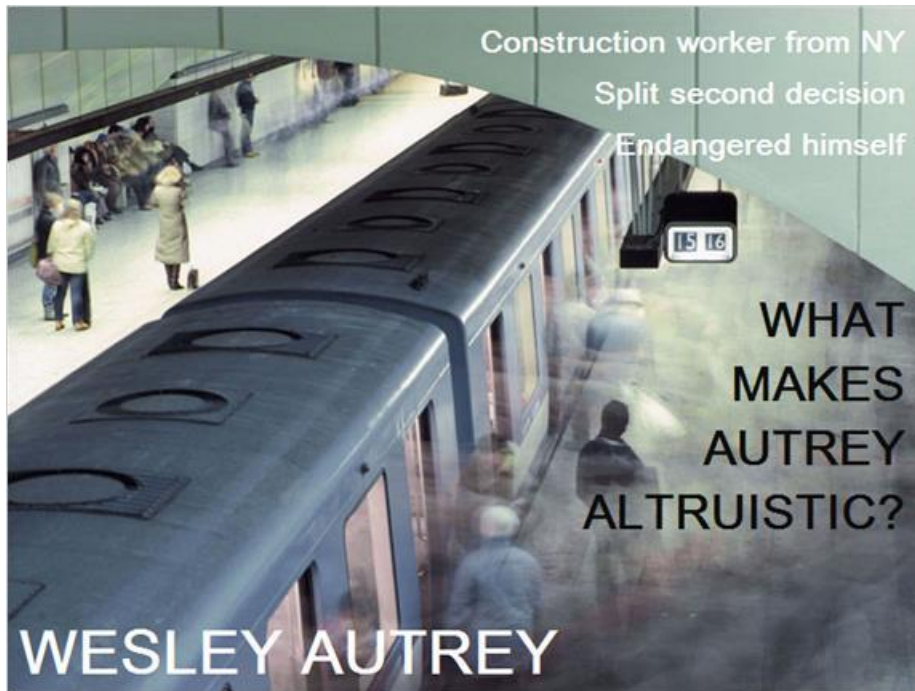
Subway Scenario
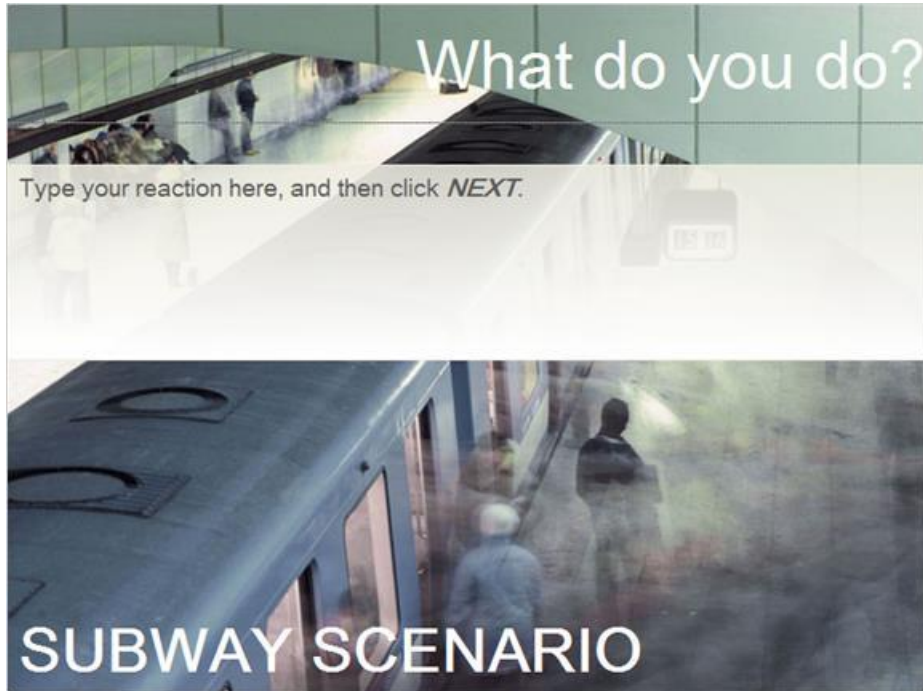
Imagine you are waiting at a subway station for the train to arrive. As you hear the rumbling of the oncoming train, a man on the platform has a seizure and falls onto the tracks. What do you do?

Wesley Autrey

In 2007, this exact scenario happened to Wesley Autrey, a construction worker from New York. As scary as this must have been for Autrey, he made the decision to jump onto the tracks and try to save the man who fell. His two young daughters were watching, and there was not enough time to bring himself or the man back onto the platform. In fact, Autrey had to push himself and the man into a narrow trench while the train passed over their heads.

Autrey's actions were an extreme case of altruism. He acted to help someone else without any expectation for personal gain.

Altruistic Actions

You do not have to endanger yourself to act altruistically. Some other examples of altruism include donating money, time, or experience, particularly if you take these actions without an underlying motive.

Identifying Altruism

Hover your cursor over each of the people on this slide to find out why they are picking up trash on the side of the road. Select the person who you feel is acting altruistically. Then, click **SUBMIT** to check your answer.

Identifying Altruism Feedback

CONSIDER THE MOTIVES

The retired woman is altruistic.

Should the term "altruism" be used?

Perceived and real motives matter.

FEEDBACK
IDENTIFYING ALTRUISM

Although each person is performing the same task, they have different motives for their actions. While the retired woman picking up trash is acting altruistically to help her community, some psychologists, particularly those from a behaviorist perspective, actually avoid using the term *altruism* altogether. After all, isn't the retired woman benefitting from the "good feeling" she gets from helping others?

Nevertheless, social psychologists would argue that there is a real difference between the three people in the example. Both perceived and real motives matter.

Factors Contributing to Altruism

How do you decide whether to help someone in need? For example, if you were riding an elevator and the person next to you accidentally dropped a large number of coins, would you intervene and help them pick the coins up?

Research shows that the presence of others affects your behavior. If there had been one other person in the elevator when the coins fell, you likely would have helped the stranger pick them up. However, if a larger number of people had been riding the elevator, the chances of you helping would *decrease*. This is called the **bystander effect**. The bystander effect may be due to the fact that people assume someone else will take responsibility for the person in need. You can actually minimize the bystander effect by appointing someone to help in a situation, like a first responder may do at an accident scene by making eye contact and saying, "You in the red shirt, call 911," as opposed to "Someone call 911."

State of Mind

Research on social psychology also found that happy people are more likely to help others. However, people who are in a hurry, frustrated, or believe the victim is dissimilar to themselves are less willing to help a stranger.