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2023 High School Scholarship Essay Contest
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The Formula of Impact

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In mathematics, the difference is the result of subtracting one number from another. Outside of math, a "difference" is associated with a positive outcome, such as making a difference in the world. However, this association between "difference" and positivity fails to recognize that everyone makes an impact, in ways that can be helpful or harmful. Jane Goodall acknowledges the variability of impact when she asserts, "What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make." Goodall emphasizes the power of intention in decision-making. Even a lack of choice yields an impact, so it is up to every individual to consider what remains after actions are subtracted from intentions.

Any action, whether small or large, can impact the bigger picture or be impacted by it. If an action can change the narrative, then humans should challenge themselves to take it. In his letter from Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. addresses the oppression that Black Americans faced in the 1960s. He pointed out that freedom "must be demanded by the oppressed,"⁽¹⁾ and we must hold ourselves responsible to create change. Although King's words inspired change in civil rights action and legislation, challenges remain today regarding equality in America. In 2020, George Floyd was another Black man who lost his life due to police brutality. A cop that was supposed to protect and serve held his knee on Floyd's neck, choking him to death. This officer made his own choice, a negative one with

a fatal impact. Fighting for air, Floyd gasped, "I can't breathe,"(2) a statement that rocked the nation. These three words served as a reminder that the fight for equality must continue, and that Americans needed to consider their own impact in the pursuit of racial justice.

George Floyd's death exemplifies the ripple effect of impact. Protests grew, social media posts spread like wildfire, and new policies were created. Out of this tragedy, over "half a million people turned out in nearly 550 places across the United States."(3) On social media platforms, many posted black screens, captioning the post "#BLM" to show support. In addition, the calls to reform police training were heard, with programs such as the New Orleans Police Department's "peer intervention training program, Ethical Policing Is Courageous (EPIC),"(4) in order to eliminate racial bias in law enforcement. The efforts of BLM also encouraged others, from school districts to government agencies, to recognize the need for all people to be conscious of their impacts and to realize that ignorance and apathy are not excuses.

In order to move forward as a society, people must be willing to fight for change and challenge bystanders to join them. Whether the issue is police brutality, gun violence, or reproductive rights, every person needs to realize that they, as Goodall states, "have to decide what kind of difference [they] want to make." The sum of intention plus action equals an outcome. The only variable is you.

(1) King, Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Bill of Rights Institute, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/letter-from-birmingham-jail/>.

(2) "'I Can't Breathe': The Refrain That Reignited a Movement." Amnesty International, 11 Oct 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/i-cant-breathe-refrain-reignited-movement/>.

(3) Buchanan, Larry, et. al. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." The New York Times, 3 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

(4) Vasilogambros, Matt. "Training Police to Step in and Prevent Another George Floyd." The Pew Charitable Trusts, 5 June 2020, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/statelne/2020/06/05/training-police-to-step-in-and-prevent-another-george-floyd/>.