

Longing to be a Victim

By: John Stossel – October 16, 2013

John Stossel is host of "Stossel" on the Fox Business Network, and the author of "No They Can't! Why Government Fails, but Individuals Succeed."

These days, being seen as a victim can be useful. You immediately claim the moral high ground. Some people want to help you. Lawyers and politicians brag that they *force* others to help you.

This turns some people into whiners with little sense of responsibility.

Joe Biden's niece was arrested recently for throwing a punch at a cop. The New York Post says she's addicted to alcohol and pills, but rather than take responsibility for her actions, she blamed them on the "pressure she faces" because her uncle is vice president.

Give me a break. America was founded by people who were the opposite of victims, by people with grit. Overcoming obstacles is the route to prosperity — and happiness, too.

I had to overcome stuttering to work as a TV reporter. Had today's disability laws existed when I began work, would I have overcome my stuttering problem? Maybe not. I might have demanded my employer "accommodate" my disability by providing me a job that didn't demand being on-air.

Now that the laws exist, it's no coincidence that more Americans say they are disabled.

Tad DeHaven of the Cato Institute writes that this is part of a *disability-industrial complex* : collusion between specialty law firms, doctors vouching for applicants with dubious claims and federal administrative law judges awarding benefits.

It changes the way people calculate their options.

Despite improved medical care and the workforce's dramatic shift from physical to mental labor, the number of Americans claiming disability keeps growing. You start to feel like a sucker if you're not one of them.

On my TV show, DeHaven said today even poor parents "try to get their kids on psychotropic medications in hopes of qualifying for a check that goes to Dad and Mom."

Since the 80s, there has been a 300 percent increase in disability claims for hard-to-prove illnesses like back pain, stress and other "non-exertional restrictions." Over the past two decades, the number of people receiving Social Security disability benefits grew from 4 million to 11 million.

"It's like any other government program," says DeHaven.

"You start off with good intentions and then it becomes something that it was never supposed to be."

We all want to help the genuinely disabled, but a wide range of subjective ailments are affected by attitude. Labeling people victims, telling them they need help, teaches some to think like victims. Social scientists call that "learned helplessness."

Private charities are pretty good at separating real victims from malingerers. But government is not. Its one-size-fits-all rules encourage people to act like victims.

Whether people have real physical ailments or just see the economic deck stacked against them, the most damaging thing say to them is: Give up. You can't make it on your own. Wait for help.

Pessimism changes what we think is possible. It shrinks our horizons.

We in the media keep an eye out for people who are victimized. Sometimes that's a valuable service. But it often means looking for victims when they really aren't there. This makes reporters feel like heroes — noble sentries protecting the powerless.

Even the newly crowned Miss America, Nina Davuluri, who sure seems like a winner by conventional standards, was portrayed as a victim in many news stories. Since she's the first Miss America of Indian descent, some trolls on Twitter made racist remarks.

But skeptical writer Gavin McInnes did a little digging. He found those racist Twitter users were almost certainly just irresponsible little kids. One of the media's most quoted tweets, "You look like a terrorist," was sent by a Twitter user with *zero* followers.

If millions of people are familiar with that remark now — and some Americans grow up a little bit more frightened that they will be victimized — it will be largely because media hyped racism rather than because of the handful of racists themselves.

America is full of success stories. But if we obsess over stories about victimhood, that is what we'll get.