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Dear Editor,

The tragic events associated with the collision of a US submarine with a Japanese fishing boat, and subsequent pain and suffering, have led to the usual round of finger pointing and calls for punishment. However, the truth seems to be that pain and suffering are inevitable components of life. Human beings don't like pain. Pain can lead to feelings of vulnerability and helplessness that make us very uncomfortable and remind us of the fragility of life.

We have developed a culture of blame and punishment. If something bad has happened, we act as if there must be a bad person out there and we loudly proclaim our search. But the truth is that sometimes mistakes are made by good people with good intentions. If good people make a mistake, then blame and punishment is just a form of scapegoating.

We see this process so often. A surgeon makes a mistake and is sued for malpractice and maybe even prosecuted for wrongdoing. A young woman falls asleep and drives her car into a group of people. Criminalizing and/or punishing people who make mistakes that lead to tragedy doesn't contribute anything except to give the injured parties a sense of having some recourse in response to their pain and suffering. I do not mean to be insensitive to that pain and suffering. People in pain are entitled to the caring sensitive responses of an enlightened educated society. But we need to replace blame and punishment with concerned interest and education with the understanding that humans do make mistakes. Surround the aggrieved with love and support but stop treating errors with hostility and condemnation. We must stop punishing humans for being human.

Yours truly,

Charles Gustafson