

# Bystander Intervention: Taking Action to Prevent Violence

All of us can play a role in responding to violence, harassment, and harm. When we witness these kinds of things happening to someone in public, it's often hard to know how to respond in a way that is helpful to the person experiencing harm, that does not escalate the situation, and that protects our own physical and emotional safety.

Luckily, there are tools we can use to prepare to be an active bystander. Knowing our strengths and what tactics work for us, we can help to keep our communities safer.



## **What stops people from stepping in?**

The reasons we may not step in come from very real concerns for our own safety, not knowing how we can help, and worrying that we could escalate or worsen the situation. These are serious considerations that might shape our response to an instance of violence or harassment.

We also might imagine that being an active bystander looks a specific way. We often imagine someone who physically puts their body between the harm-doer and the person being harmed, who raises their voice, and who shuts down the altercation.

But this is just one way to be an active bystander, using a “direct” approach. Direct action is not always the best approach to interrupt violence.

Even engaging after the fact—checking in with someone who has experienced harm—helps to build support and reduce negative outcomes and trauma responses.

Often, we have an instinctive response about how we can help in a stressful situation. For example, calling in others for help, or checking in with the person who was harmed afterward to see what they need. While less direct, these are incredibly effective forms of bystander intervention.

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## Consider these “5 D’s” of bystander intervention:

- **Distract:** being creative and causing a distraction to diffuse the situation (ex: pretending you know the person being harassed and asking them something unrelated to the situation, loudly dropping a water bottle)
- **Delay:** holding off on your actions until after the threat has passed, then checking in with the person being harassed, offering support
- **Delegate:** getting others involved to diffuse a situation (ex: asking the bus driver to step in, making a formal report IF the person who experienced the violence wants that)
- **Document:** recording (either by video, or text) the incident, then making sure that this documentation is in the hands of the person who was victimized, rather than spread online
- **Direct:** directly interrupting an instance of violence (ex: speaking up that something isn't right)

## Any response to harm makes a difference.

No one will have the perfect response to an instance of violence or harassment. Sometimes we freeze, even when we know what might help. Know that you do not have to have a perfect response to make a difference. You do not have to be the person who directly intervenes. Through learning what strategies come naturally to us, and building confidence in our abilities as bystanders, we can help to reduce harm and keep our communities safer.

## Additional resources:

[Right to Be: Bystander Intervention tools](#)

[Empowerment Self Defense: a conversation with Lauren Taylor](#)

[Bystander Intervention Tip Sheet](#)