

Please (Don't) Stand By: How Not to be a Bystander When You Can Instead Be a Helper

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In a simpler time on a simpler Earth, when dinner came from the freezer in a silver foil tray and we slogged across the room to change the television channel by hand (unless we had a little brother – then he slogged), we would often find our favorite programs cut out abruptly, and without warning. Sitcoms disappeared mid-laugh track, Walter Cronkite's white mustache vanished instantly into the ether. Our entertainment was replaced by a shrieking sound tone and a sequence of Technicolor stripes designed to pierce the retina on impact. The corresponding caption on-screen: "We are experiencing technical difficulties. Please stand by."

For those of you born before the dawn of cable and thus privy to this injustice: Did you stand by?

No, you probably did not.

None of us did.

Instead, we stomped across the shag carpet and whined away to our rooms. Or we yelled for help (that's "Daaaaaaaad!" with 9 "a"s). Or we practiced our roundhouse into the faux oak paneling of the TV set, an attempt to upset the intrusion through sheer force. Whatever we did, it was not simply standing by. We knew that would mean surrender, and with surrender comes no change.

So, how is it that we were ardently proactive against Columbo Interruptus and the intrusion on our nightly news just to grow up into people who, well, passively stand by? And especially in times of crisis?

There is science behind it.

Research blames a social psychology theory called the "bystander effect." It claims, the greater the number of people nearby, the less likely they are to help someone in distress. In other words, if a bunch of bystanders witness violence, it's likely no one will help. The theory assumes that the presence of others takes the pressure off of us as individuals to act ("meh, someone else will take care of it") while at the same time activating the idea that it is socially appropriate to behave like those around us, a la herd mentality (so their

inaction leads to our inaction... which leads to their inaction... which leads to ours...). Whatever the reason, this concept flies in the face of “safety in numbers,” making violence out in the open easier and without interruption. According to the bystander effect, we may not be pleased to stand by, but despite ourselves, we do.

In response to this distressing proposition, there is a framework called “bystander intervention” which helps people recognize healthy and unhealthy behaviors that might lead to violence – and sexual violence in particular – and teaches them how best to intervene before the disturbance escalates. The process consists of:

1. Recognizing that violence may be occurring or about to occur
2. Assessing if intervention is appropriate
3. Deciding whether or not to take responsibility for intervention
4. Determining the safest and most appropriate way to intervene
5. Intervening

In short, if you see something, do something... but safely.

How Do We Know if a Situation is Violent or Potentially Violent?

Think of a scale – almost like the pain charts we see at the doctor’s – to measure the level of threat. On the low end of the scale, we will see healthy, age-appropriate, safe, and respectful interaction. On the high end lies highly dangerous behaviors such as sexual abuse, rape, and other forms of Violence.

Between the two extremes exist inappropriate speech and action, coercion, and harassment. Getting involved while activity is still in this mid-range allows us, according to Joan Tabachnick’s Engaging Bystanders in Sexual Violence Prevention Booklet, to “intervene and reinforce positive behaviors BEFORE a behavior moves further along the continuum into something violent.” So the sooner we step in, the better we can influence the aggressor, affect the outcome, and protect ourselves and others from harm.

How Can We Intervene in a Helpful and Safe Way?

RAINN suggests a number of ways to effectively – and safely – intercede.

- Create a distraction.

- Do this by communicating with the individual at risk. Approach them and offer to go somewhere else with them, in a firm but calm way. “Hey, let’s take off and get some pizza” or “come take a walk with me over there” will provide the opportunity to exit a dangerous situation. Or simply break the tension by suggesting a game (if you’re at a party), getting some fresh air, or introducing food or drink to the situation. Sometimes changing just one element in the atmosphere is enough to redirect attention.
- Discuss what’s going on.
- Approach the person at risk and ask them directly if they need help, want you to take them away from the situation, or prefer that you stay with them. It is important not to leave the vulnerable person alone in a situation that may escalate.
- Call for Backup.
- If you feel at risk or don’t want to walk in on a heated situation alone, enlist the help of another person to help you intervene. They can accompany you in confronting the agitator, approach the person in place of you. Approaching people who have a relationship with the person at risk will give them added motivation to lend a hand.

Working Against Violence, Inc. also recommends reaching out for an adult’s help (if you are a minor), educating ourselves on types of abuse and signs that they are happening, showing care and empathy, calling 911 in times of immediate danger, and calling out inappropriate behaviors and conversations that can devolve into violence. Speaking up when individuals are endangered and speaking out when others become aggressive – or if they are acting in support of the antagonist with laughter or rumor-mongering – immediately makes you an ally.

Too Many Options to Digest?

When in doubt, remember the Hollaback! campaign’s 5 D’s (not to be confused with Five Alive, which is a fruit juice and has nothing to do with any of this):

- **Distract** by creating a commotion (spill your water! Drop a bag of marbles!) or simply initiating small talk.
- **Delegate** by asking a third party for assistance (especially an authority figure).
- **Document** by taking notes or a video of the situation (in case details or verification are later required).
- **Delay** by offering support or aid to the person who was victimized.

- **Direct** – once everyone is safe – by “speaking firmly and clearly against the harassment/discrimination taking place.” However, this last approach should take a backseat to caring for the person who was victimized. Aiding the victim is more important than educating the offender in the heat of the moment.

Take to the World Wide Web

Want to encourage more youth to become active bystanders? Want to prepare your loved ones to advocate for sexual violence prevention? Try these cyber-based programs with the young people in your life:

- NIOS: Take on Cyberbullying uses a peer education model, utilizing peer leaders to take a stand against bullying and violence among middle and high school students. <http://www.niot.org/nios/lesson/lesson-idea-%E2%80%9Cstudents-takecyberbullying%E2%80%9D>
- That’s Not Cool provides resources and information on ways to intervene if a young person has a friend, family member or acquaintance who is being verbally, emotionally or sexually harassed via technology. <http://www.thatnotcool.com>
- Love is Respect addresses the issues of “textual violence” and sexual harassment via technology, as well as support for bystanders on how to help a friend who may be experiencing sexual violence. <http://www.loveisrespect.org/>
- Circle of 6 is a smart phone app focused on the primary prevention of sexual violence and other forms of violence before the violence occurs. <https://appsagainstabuse.devpost.com/submissions/4900-circle-of-6>

Yes, there was little we could do to make Fonzie reappear after being bumped off the screen by the Broadcast System way back when, but we are much more empowered and prepared today to change the trajectory of escalating aggression.

There is a right time and best place to remain a bystander. In the face of sexual violence is not one of them.