# **Active Bystander Intervention**

This resource is slightly adapted, with permission, from the University of Waterloo’s Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office, “[Active Bystander Intervention](https://uwaterloo.ca/sexual-violence-prevention-response-office/give-support/active-bystander-intervention).” We have adapted it to extend to other kinds of harms that occur in academic life, including micro aggressions.

**How can I be an Active Bystander?**

We all have a role to play in creating a professional society where people feel safe, comfortable, and accepted. We can all be active bystanders who help and support one another.

A bystander is a witness to a negative event or situation either online or in-person. We have all been bystanders. A person becomes an **active bystander** when they see an event or situation which is problematic, inappropriate, or harmful, and intervenes either directly or indirectly. We all have the potential to be active bystanders.

An active bystander is someone who:

* Works to build a community that does not tolerate, accept, or allow sexual, sexist, or racist violence, harassment, or micro/macro aggressions;
* Looks out for others and supports those impacted by harmful comments, jokes, bullying, or sexual harassment and assault;
* Considers their own safety and the safety of others;
* Does not ignore problematic situations by looking the other way, denying they are happening, or calling them something else;
* Intervenes in appropriate ways.

## **What stops people from intervening?**

### **The Bystander Effect**

People are less likely to help someone in need when others are present. This is known as the *Bystander Effect,* and it occurs for two reasons:

1. **Diffusion of responsibility –** if others are present, people feel that others are responsible for intervening
2. **Social influence** – if no one is intervening, it seems like the correct behaviour--so others do not intervene

Lack of intervention can give the impression that the harmful behaviour is condoned by others when often it is not. It can be difficult to be the first person to intervene, but once one person intervenes others usually do as well.

### **What else makes it hard to intervene?**

* Safety concerns – for yourself and others, especially if you belong to a community that experiences discrimination.
* Power dynamics – the person causing harm may be in a position of privilege or authority.
* Fear – about doing it wrong, or making things worse.
* Worry – that other negative consequences could happen due to your intervention.
* Social consequences – such as being seen as too sensitive or no fun.
* Not knowing - if it your place or your business to intervene.
* Lack of skills - not having the skills to know what to say or do.
* An assumption that the person didn’t mean harm, but is just clueless.

These are all valid concerns and reasons someone may not intervene. It is important to always put safety first. If you do not feel safe, it is OK to do nothing in the moment or to leave a situation.. Below are ways you can stay safe and still intervene as an active bystander.

Responses, or interventions, can be organized into 5 categories called the 5Ds.

## **The 5Ds of Bystander Intervention**

The 5Ds of bystander intervention are various ways you can support someone who is being harassed, harmed, or made to feel uncomfortable. When you are choosing to intervene, it is important to consider your own safety and the safety of those around you. There is a difference between feeling uncomfortable and feeling unsafe, trust that you know how and when to keep yourself safe.

### **1. Distract**

Distracting is a non-direct, sometimes subtle, creative way to intervene. It is often safer than intervening directly and allows you to use your strengths. The aim is to derail and de-escalate the situation by interrupting it in ways such as accidently- on-purpose spilling your drink, or causing a commotion.

If you see harm online, you can distract from the harmful messages or ask the person causing harm unrelated questions to waste their time. Do what you need to do to break the flow of potential harm or violence without referring to the harm directly.

### **2. Delegate**

Delegating is to ask for assistance or help from a third party, possibly from someone nearby or in a position of authority such as a CSBS executive member (or outside of the Society, a store manager, bouncer, administrator, bus driver, etc.). You can also work together, ask those around you if they are willing to help as there is comfort, safety, and strength in numbers. Online you can report the harmful post/comment to the social media platform.

You may also want to ask someone around you to intervene, “I don’t feel safe helping do you?” Our social location and privilege often determines how safe we feel; if you do not feel safe it is OK not to intervene in the moment, you can always delay and check in later.

You can also check in with the person being harmed, possibly with a distraction. Or, if they are under threat, ask if they would like you to call 911. **It is important to remember though, not everyone feels safe with the intervention of law enforcement and your level of trust with the police may not be everyone’s level of trust.**

### **3. Document**

Documenting is making a record of the incident with video, audio, or pics, or taking notes or paying close attention. If someone else is intervening, go ahead and document. You could for example use your phone to take a video; but remember, ALWAYS ask the person being harmed what they would like to do with the video – do not post these without their consent as this is not being an effective and helpful bystander and could cause more harm.

If you are online, you could take a screenshot, since harmful material may be lost if removed and you may want a record of it.

### **4. Direct**

You can directly respond to the harm by naming the harm and confronting the person causing harm. However, other Ds such as distract, delegate, document and delay can be just as, or sometimes more, effective. Before you decide to respond directly, assess the situation, and ensure you are safe. Direct intervention may be risky and can escalate the situation or turn the harm towards you. If you feel safe you could say something such as, “That’s sexist, racist, transphobic …” or “Leave them alone.”

You can also look away, cross your arms, frown, raise your eyebrows – show your disapproval without saying anything. Try to remain calm and keep what you say clear and concise and then turn your attention to the person being harmed and check in to see if they are OK.

### **5. Delay**

Delaying can be very effective but sometimes does not get the respect it deserves. Checking in after the incident can prevent someone from blaming themselves, feeling alone, and even reduce trauma, and it can always be done in tandem with other Ds. You could say, “I’m sorry that happened to you” or “that was not your fault.” You can also message someone privately online or reach out through a text if you know them.

Sometimes the harm from no one doing or saying anything is worse than the initial harm done; checking in can alleviate some of this harm. There is no perfect or right response, however, studies show that having some kind of response, either in the moment or later, can reduce the trauma felt by the person facing harm.

### **Debrief**

No matter how you intervened, if you intervened, if you experienced harm or were the person causing harm, talking over the situation with the appropriate person (e.g., friend, housemate, counsellor) can help you understand what happened, and help you decide how you could respond in a similar situation in the future. You may be left feeling overwhelmed, upset, scared, or confused, and it is important to acknowledge and talk through these feelings.

## **What if you are the person being harmed?**

You may find yourself in the position of being harmed. There may or may not be bystanders around. It is possible to intervene on your own behalf.

**Possible responses if you are the person being harmed**

* Trust your instincts – if something does not feel right listen to your body and do not worry about being polite – walk away, run away, fight back.
* Delegate – ask for help if people are around.
* Document – pretend to be on your phone while taking a video.
* Call a friend so you are not alone.
* Set boundaries - “can you stay back 6 feet please?”
* Reclaim your space - say loudly, “Stop touching me!”
* Reclaim your discursive space--say, “I found what you just said offensive,” or “My point was just sidelined, but as I was saying.”
* Online – take screenshots, unfollow.
* Debrief afterward with someone you trust.
* Reach out to the Federation ombudsperson.

## **Your Intervention Matters**

Sometimes we may think that it doesn’t matter whether we intervene or not. Sometimes we may feel defeated and think that it doesn’t make a difference. However, interrupting harm in all its forms (comments, jokes, harassment, assaults etc.) challenges the ongoing normalization of such violence.

When our communities tolerate attitudes and behaviours that are cutting, offensive, violent, or otherwise harmful, the foundation for other forms of harm is created and normalized.

Toxic culture influences all of us – often without us knowing. To change outcomes, we must change the culture. It is not just the existence of harmful behaviours that is a problem, but the acceptance of these as part of academic life, or just the way things are.

Intervening shows your community that you care, and you do not tolerate or accept harmful behaviours. It also offers an opportunity to change social norms. Social norms are patterns of behaviour in communities that are accepted as normal and to which individuals are expected to conform. Moving our social norms from those that uphold toxic, exclusionary or sexually violent culture to those that uphold inclusive consent culture will help create a caring society which will benefit us all.

**Further Resources**

<https://www.stopbullying.gov/sites/default/files/2018-08/Bystander-Factsheet.pdf>

<https://www.concordia.ca/conduct/sexual-assault/bystander.html>

<https://righttobe.org/guides/bystander-intervention-training/>