

Bystander Behavior and Bystander Intervention Explained

What is Bystander behavior?

A bystander is someone who witnesses a problem behavior and does nothing about it. Bystander behavior involves the stages a bystander might go through when moving from inaction to possible action.

The stages are: notice the event, interpret it as a problem, feel responsible for dealing with it, and possess the necessary skills to act.

Barriers to Intervening

There are some things that stop us from intervening, let's explore them.

1. Social Influence – “It looks like something is wrong, but I don't see anyone else doing anything, so maybe it's not so bad after all.”
2. Fear of Embarrassment – “If I react or get involved, it might call negative attention to me, or embarrass the person I'm trying to help.”
3. Diffusion of Responsibility – “There's got to be someone who's more qualified than me to handle this, so I'll wait and let them do it.”
4. Fear of Retaliation – “I don't want them to start picking on me next!” A bystander may have a legitimate fear of negative consequences or retaliation if they intervene. This fear may include fear of physical and/or emotional harm, retaliation, lack of support from superiors for attempting to intervene and negative reaction or comments from others. This fear may be heightened if the person has had a previous negative experience.
5. Pluralistic ignorance – “This is the way we've always done things, and no one's speaking up, so everyone else must think this is the best way to handle it.” A bystander misperceives others' concern and desire for intervention. This occurs when most people in a group are concerned and want to act but incorrectly believe that they are in the minority, acquiescing to what is perceived as the majority view by being silent.

Intervention Styles

Here are three possible strategies you might use to intervene, either in the moment, or later.

Confrontation

The first strategy you might use is confrontation. This is a directed conversation with someone to let them know that their behavior and/or remarks are not appropriate, or that you have concern for someone about their behavior.

- Express concern and caring - Begin by showing interest in the person and how they are doing, either in general or in relation to your area of concern. Although this can feel contrived, it establishes a helpful tone. Pick an appropriate time and place in order to create optimal conditions for the discussion.
- Share the basis of your concern with specifics – Let the person know what you have noticed and describe it in detail. For example, rather than saying, “I think you have a drinking problem,” you might say, “I’ve noticed that you’ve been out partying a few nights this week, and slept through your morning class.”
- Share how it makes you and others feel – Use “I statements.” Example: “I know that there are a few people on the floor who had an early exam today, and I wonder if you’re coming in late and playing music disturbed them?”
- Ask the other person if they understand your point of view – This is a chance to listen and hear how the person is responding to your feedback.
- Brainstorm what can be done – Consider the alternatives to the behavior and go over them together, including the possible consequences for the behavior. Make sure to solicit ideas from the person you are confronting.
- Offer support for change – Let the person know that you are willing to help, and give examples of how you might do this. Suggest or impose consequences if necessary.
- Have a plan for follow-up – Let the person know that you plan to follow-up with them and that you should both plan to discuss and evaluate if the behavior has changed.

*On some occasions it may be possible to go through all the stages at once. At other times, the discussion can take place in stages over time.

Shifting the Focus

The second strategy is shifting the focus. This strategy does not address the problem behavior, but rather shifts the attention to something else.

- Ignore the remark or behavior or leave (nonparticipation) – Can be a valuable option if it’s not a good time to respond or if you feel you can’t be effective. Not responding directly to the offending remark or behavior is always a better option than joining in, supporting or enabling a remark or behavior, or giving the impression that you aren’t offended by it.
- Shift attention away from the remark or behavior (deflection) – For example, if a guy makes an inappropriate comment about a girl’s body, you could say, “I’m more worried right now

about an exam I have tomorrow.” This response doesn’t address the behavior directly, but it does create a pause in the conversation. Also sends a subtle message to others that you are not comfortable with the remark.

- Reframe the remark more positively (re-framing) – In the example given above, you might say, “Well, what I really like about her is that she’s helped me out when I’ve been dealing with stress in the past.”

*Shifting the focus is a way to NOT enable or participate in a remark. It can be done calmly, quietly, and on the spot when appropriate.

Shifting the Person

The final strategy is shifting the person. The goal of “shifting the person,” (also called “shifting attitudes”) is to help someone understand their motivation for making a remark or engaging in a behavior and to help them understand why it is problematic so that they will be less likely to engage in it in the future. You are helping them to change their attitude.

- First, take care of yourself – Get support for yourself; don’t act in isolation. Remember, if you feel upset by the behavior then you won’t be able to listen well to the other person, and they won’t feel heard (and motivated to change). Find someone to be your ally, someone to vent to and express your frustration to.
- Always give respect to the other person – To listen does not mean that we agree with or condone anyone’s behavior, or that we are compromising what we believe. To listen is to offer another person basic respect for the humanness that we share in hope that dialogue can occur as a result.
- Listen for the upset that is underneath – Hurtful behavior is often a sign that a person is frustrated about something. The more we can give respectful attention to someone, the more they will be able to let go of assumptions that allow them to justify their behavior.
- Notice what increases or decreases defensiveness – The goal is to help the other person gain understanding and insight, not to put them on the defensive or cause them to feel attacked.
- Engage in “open talk” – Conversational style that conveys interest in understanding the person making the remark or engaging in the behavior. Try comments like, “Tell me more” and “I can tell that this is important to you, and I want to understand how you feel.”

References:

Berkowitz, A. (2009). Response Ability: A Complete Guide to Bystander Intervention. Chicago, IL: Beck & Co.