

BEING A BYSTANDER

What is a bystander?

A bystander is a person who sees a criminal event or a situation that could lead to harm to another. A bystander can provide assistance, do nothing or contribute to the problem.

As a bystander you might see an assault or a sexual assault about to occur OR actually occurring. Some examples are:

- A girl is being taken for a walk on the beach by her boyfriend. You overhear her saying she doesn't want to go for a walk but he is insisting and she is becoming distressed. She clearly does not want to go but he is insisting and starting to physically force her by taking her arm.
- You and a number of other friends receive a youtube video from a classmate. The video is of him having sex with another classmate who is very drunk.
- A couple are getting into a loud argument next to you at a party. The guy is really starting to yell and the girl appears afraid.
- You are at a venue and a girl is very drunk and being hassled by a guy she doesn't appear to know. You saw her friends leave earlier and she is now alone. She is not interested but he is starting to become pretty insistent.
- A guy is alone outside a gig waiting for a taxi. Another bunch of guys approach him and start teasing him about what he's wearing. The guy waiting for the taxi looks pretty uncomfortable. There is no sign of a taxi and the bunch of other guys are starting to close in on him.

These are all situations where you are a bystander to a potentially, or actually, violent situation.

Reasons bystanders don't act

Bystanders might not act in situations where:

- There is a big group and everyone assumes somebody else will intervene.
- The victim is not making it clear if help is needed.
- They do not feel they have the skills to intervene (eg. if they do not feel capable of handling aggression if it is turned toward them).



- They feel there is a risk of more trouble if they do intervene.
- They don't see it as any of their business to intervene
- They don't know if they should intervene – if they will just 'make a scene'.

Assessing a situation if you are a bystander

As a bystander it is very important to evaluate the situation before you act. Some important things for you to consider:

- Is there a risky situation?
- Does someone need help?
- Can I help and keep myself safe?
- Are there other people I can call for help? (friends, police, teacher, manager)
- What other resources do I have? (phone, car)

If you are a bystander – what can you do?

- Think about the situation and potential risks
- See if anyone else is going to intervene
- Establish if it is safe for you to intervene
- If possible, arrange some back-up or support (eg. friends)
- Seek more formal support if it is not safe for you to intervene (eg. police)

This section has been adapted from Carmody, M. (2009), *Sex and Ethics: young people and ethical sex*, Palgrave Macmillan, Melbourne, pp. 124-128. Reproduced by permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

For more information see the Sexual Ethics website. www.sexualethics.org.au

