What is a Bystander

A Bystander observes conflicts or inappropriate behavior—some minor and some serious. For example, a person witnesses an argument that becomes harassing or violent. An active bystander takes positive steps to assist in the resolution of the issue. Having a community of active bystanders can alter the cultural norms in a positive fashion.

Statistically approximately 85% of students have at one time witnessed negative interactions among other students. When individuals act in a passive or negative manner, this silence/passivity can empower the actor and dis-empower the victim. Typically, bystanders may fail to intervene for a variety of reasons:

- they may fear retaliation;
- they are unsure how to respond;
- they may be afraid of doing the wrong thing or making the situation worse;
- they may de-value the victim because of the way the victim looks or what the victim has done;
- they may not feel responsible;
- they may believe someone else should take the leadership role to resolve the situation;
- they may be affected by pluralistic ignorance (everyone acts as if there is no problem).

When student bystanders are active, their academic performance improves as does the student they help. Being an active bystander is not an aggressive action, and may take many forms:

- making comments that help defuse the situation,
- making disapproving comments by witnesses of harmful actions,
- making expressions of caring about the target,
- casually removing the target from the group of aggressors, or
- finding an authority figure to intervene.

Bystanders can gain substantial power by collectively taking positive action.

TIPS

If you witness a policy violation, or behaviors that may lead to a policy violation, there are a variety of things you can do as a bystander:

- Divert the intended victim (e.g. “help me out of here; I don’t feel well”)
- Distract the perpetrator (e.g. “looks like your car is being towed”)
• Confront the perpetrator (e.g. “don’t speak to him/her in that manner; you are going to get yourself into trouble”)
• Educate your community
  • Bystander intervention work-shops conducted through the Gender + Equality Center (405) 325-5352
  • Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination and Harassment training provided through the Institutional Equity Office (405) 325-2215 or (405) 325-3546
• Call for law enforcement assistance
  • Emergencies-911
  • Non-emergencies-(405) 325-2864

Interactive Scenarios

1. Acknowledging the Offense:

   Name or identify inappropriate behavior so it isn’t just glossed over or ignored. Create an opening for discussion.

   **Tips:**
   Direct feedback in the moment may be perceived as disruptive or inappropriate, depending on the forum. Waiting may be more effective in some cases. Highlight the damaging effect of the offense, while avoiding inflammatory language or judgments.

   Example 1

   You are with a group of friends all discussing the attractiveness of female students walking by you. One of your friends says: “I’d like to get her wasted so I can take advantage of her.”

   Instead of laughing this comment off, an active bystander should acknowledge the statement and indicate its offensiveness. “Hey, that’s not cool or funny. You’re giving us a bad rep with that kind of talk.”

   Example 2

   Your professor jokingly refers to your friend as Monica Lewinsky and it embarrasses your friend, but she is too shy to say something to the Professor.

   You should informally chat with the professor after class to avoid public embarrassment for your friend and the professor. You can indicate that
you felt his jokes were offensive and that while you don’t know for certain how your friend feels about it, that it could certainly be embarrassing for her and made others in the class uncomfortable.

2. Interrupt the Behavior

Protect someone from being hurt or offended and someone else from giving offense or harm. Make it clear that such behavior is not acceptable in this community.

**Tips:**
Intervention may be direct and obvious, such as stating directly to the offending person that the behavior is unacceptable, or may be via subterfuge, such as interrupting an argument to ask for directions.

Example 1

You see a student who appears so drunk he or she can barely walk stumbling towards a car parked nearby, keys in hand.

Say something about this not being a good time to drive and taking the keys from the Student, advising them to get the keys back from the Campus Police the next day. Then drop the keys off at the Campus Police station.

Or, take the keys from his/her hand, and then offer to call the student a taxi. When the student gets in the taxi, return the keys.

Example 2

You are with your friends at a party and your visibly drunk female friend refuses to leave the party with you, and instead, seeks out a ride from a male stranger.

Physically intervene and remove her from the party ensuring that she stays the night with a friend.

3. Call for Help

See that the situation is handled by those best able to cope. Make sure that something is done, while acknowledging that you do not have the ability or authority to handle it.

For this to work in the moment, you need the ability to summon help immediately, such as a cell phone, and will likely have to do what you can to keep
the situation from deteriorating until help arrives. Seeking help after the fact is the same as reporting the incident.

Example 1

You see a student who appears so drunk he or she can barely walk stumbling towards a car parked nearby, keys in hand.

Call the Campus Police and ask them to come immediately to prevent the student from driving off. Then go talk to the student to delay his/her departure until the police arrive.

Example 2

Separately the two people who live (or work) in adjacent rooms across the hall from you have complained to you about each other. You hear them start to argue loudly in the hall.

Alert the RA (or supervisor) to the incident brewing in the hall.

How You Can Help

- Implement one of the strategies noted above whenever possible

Join the One Sooner Can Make a Difference campaign and attend one of our monthly trainings to learn more about how you can make a difference; See http://www.ou.edu/content/studentlife/diverse_communities/gec/onesooner.html for the schedule.