



You Can
Take Action
Against
Domestic Violence

**The University Health Science Center
Police Department
Against Domestic Violence**

<http://utpolice.uthscsa.edu/>

Intervening to Prevent Domestic Violence

Warning Signs that a Situation Might be Abusive:

If the person you think is an abuser is:

- Acting excessively jealous of his partner
- Insulting or embarrassing his partner in public
- Yelling at or trying to intimidate his partner

Or, if the person you suspect is a victim is:

- Acting submissive
- Showing physical injuries, or wearing unusual clothing as if to hide an injury (ie, sunglasses indoors or long sleeves in summer).
- Anxious to please her partner.
- Afraid of her partner, talking about his temper, possessiveness, or jealousy.
- Restricted from seeing family and friends.
- Limited in access to money or a car.
- Depressed, anxious, or suicidal.

Intervening

If you see any of the above signs, the behavior you're witnessing is probably abusive. Follow your instincts. If you've noticed these warning signs and expect that someone you know is being abused, don't wait for her to approach you. Look for a private moment where you can express concern and let her know you're there to support her.

Here are some ideas for what this conversation might look like:

1) Express concern

Tell your friend that you've been concerned for her or that you're worried about her. This is a non-judgmental approach that might make her feel comfortable in opening up. If she denies that anything is wrong, don't push, but communicate that you'll be there for her if she ever does want to talk.

2) Assure her that the violence is not her fault.

This can be such an important thing for a victim of violence to hear. Some useful things to say might be, "No one deserves to be treated this way," "You are not to blame," or simply, "What's happening is not your fault."

3) Support, but don't give advice

This can be so hard to do, especially if the victim is someone close to you. But remember that you cannot make someone leave a relationship that isn't ready.

Give her options and offer to help her and support her along the way, but pressuring a victim to leave a relationship who does not want to may only isolate her further by making her feel like she can't confide in you. Remember that abusive behavior is a pattern of getting power and control over someone else. *Validating a victim's choices and encouraging her to make her own decisions about her life can help to break this cycle of power and control.*

4) Give resources

Battered Women's Shelter 210-733-8810 or 24/7 National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE for victims of domestic violence. The advocates who operate these lines can provide your friend with a well-informed listening ear; can assist with safety planning; and can provide shelter and service referrals.

5) Keep it confidential

Assure the victim that anything she's said will stay between the two of you. Breaking a victim's trust after she's opened up to you may only isolate her further, and could even put her in danger.

Taking Action to Prevent Violence

Bystander Intervention

Stopping abuse before it starts

Bystander intervention to prevent domestic violence is about changing communities to make violence much less likely, or non-existent. In these cases, we're not directly addressing either the perpetrators or victims of violence. Rather, in trying to stop violence before it starts, *we as active bystanders aim to promote healthy relationships and communities that are free of violence.*

What kinds of behaviors can normalize domestic violence?

1) Sexism, or a Commitment to Rigid Gender Roles

Female Gender Stereotypes

- We're all susceptible to believing and reinforcing stereotypes about women, but these stereotypes are part of a culture of inequality between men and women that can contribute to domestic violence. Sometimes men perpetuate stereotypes about women. Stereotypes may be about objectifying women, which show up in behaviors like street harassment and catcalling. Other times male stereotypes about women may be about women being "so different" or impossible to understand. Though these kinds of stereotypes may seem minor and commonplace, when they're ingrained in a community they can reinforce the power structures and inequality that make domestic violence an option.
- But women also hold on to stereotypes about their own gender. For example, criticizing one's own body, or criticizing other women for their appearance or dress can all contribute to cultural norms of what women should be like. Whether it's about objectifying women or about belittling them for not meeting our standards for appearance or behavior, stereotypes perpetuate the gender inequity that fosters domestic violence.

Male Gender Stereotypes

- Stereotypes about men can also contribute to a culture of domestic violence. Expecting young men and boys to be "tough" as a defining part of their masculinity, or excusing aggression on the basis of it being "masculine," can normalize violence for boys and create the expectation that being a man is about being forceful. When communities support—or don't provide a counter-message against—aggression as a key component of masculinity, we reinforce the attitudes that batterers use to justify abuse.

2) Victim Blaming

These kinds of comments can be so subtle that we may have trouble recognizing them as victim blaming at first. Comments about women who stay in abusive relationships, like "She should have known better," or "She should have left sooner," hold victims

responsible for ending abuse. This can discourage survivors from seeking support, and can make it easier for abusers to justify their actions. Our conversations about abuse should hold the right people responsible (the abusers), and should consider the community-wide responsibility to promote healthy relationships.

3) Normalizing violence

Treating violence as a normal and acceptable method for resolving a conflict, even when it is only threatened or joked about, can also perpetuate violence in a community. When communities turn a blind eye to any kind of violence, it can communicate apathy toward abuse and enable domestic violence.

Specific Strategies for Intervention

The following are some specific strategies for preventative bystander intervention. Some are more direct than others, and it'll be up to you to decide what kinds of approaches you find most appealing. Remember that these are only meant to be used as examples. It's hard to put these kinds of scenarios into writing without them sounding corny or forced. Consider what we've written, think about what kind of message you want to present, and adapt our ideas to your own voice, comfort level, and situation.

1) Change the Situation: Refocusing the Conversation

This is the least direct approach to preventative bystander intervention. In this approach, the active bystander refocuses the conversation away from the offensive remark. Your goal is not to make the offender reconsider their behavior—at least not directly. Instead, the idea is to not give an audience to the offending comment or to change the situation so that no one else will support the offending comment. This might be the best approach if for some reason; the offender is not someone you feel comfortable speaking directly to (i.e., your boss, or someone in a position of authority over you). Research around bullying has indicated that removing the positive social support (the audience) is one of the most effective strategies for ending the behavior. What this might look like:

a) Create a distraction

This is a non-confrontational way to shift the focus of the conversation and distract from an offending comment. There are lots of ways to do this. Anything that prevents the offender from having a captive audience will work.

What this sounds like: Ask for the time. Ask for a menu. Ask for directions. Make a joke. Spill your drink (if you're feeling bold). Tell a story. This could be anything.

b) If the offending language is targeted at a particular person, verbally support him or her.

This is a little more direct than just causing a distraction. In this case, you're not trying to change the offender's point of view, just the direction of the conversation. You might draw attention to positive characteristics of the person being targeted or try some other similar approach. Your support for the person targeted can subtly communicate that you don't approve of the behavior, and it may encourage someone else to speak up more directly.

Example 1: You're with friends. Someone mentions a common acquaintance who you all know has been in an unhealthy relationship for some time. Her boyfriend routinely makes fun of her and embarrasses her in public. The new rumor is that they've broken up and she's looking for therapists.

How you could respond: You know that verbal and emotional abuse are types of domestic violence, even when it's between people who don't live together. Rather than joining in the gossip, you draw attention to the victim's courage for leaving and looking for help. You could say, "Whoa. That takes guts," or, "She must be really brave."

Example 2: You're having lunch with two of your female coworkers. Everyone's having a good time until the food comes and one of them begins worrying out loud about her weight. By way of consolation, your other coworker assures her she looks fine and then begins to criticize her own weight. You're the only one who hasn't something critical about her own body yet. You're new at this job and you don't know either of these women very well yet.

How you could respond: These aren't women you know well so you might feel uncomfortable saying anything specific about gender stereotypes or the unrealistic standards that women hold for themselves. Try (briefly) saying something reassuring, then move on. Tell a story, ask a question, or make a joke. Don't join in and make negative comments about your own body.

2) Change the Perspective: Engaging Others in Intervention

In this approach, you're doing more than distracting from an offending comment, but you're still not being confrontational. Rather, the goal in this approach is to use the situation to promote a new positive perspective for all the bystanders. You can do this by posing a question to the group that challenges the view you think is problematic without directly refuting it.

Example 1: You're having a dinner with a group of friends. A woman at another table has attracted the attention of two of your male friends. When she gets up to use the restroom, one of them makes a crude remark about her body. This always seems to happen when they're together.

How you could respond: Since these two friends seem to be reinforcing each other's behavior, this could be a good opportunity to use the group environment as part of your approach. You could ask, "Have you ever noticed that when we get together in a group we end up talking about women like that? Why do you think that is?"

Example 2: Your coworker has a copy of today's paper on his desk. On the cover is an article about a fundraiser for the local domestic violence shelter. Several of your coworkers have read the article, and one mentions that he'd had a friend from college who'd been in and out of a shelter for a while, but eventually returned to her husband and had since lost contact. He shakes his head and remarks that she must have been crazy to keep going back.

How you could respond: This could be a sensitive memory for your coworker,

and with other people around you probably want to find a gentle way to speak up. Even still, this could be a great opportunity to disarm the victim blaming saying it out loud. You could say something like, “I know it’s easy to ask why victims go back when we hear about domestic violence, but maybe a better question would be why someone would think its okay to harm or control someone they love.”

3) Change the Person: A Direct Confrontation

A direct confrontation is probably the most obvious approach to bystander intervention, and while it’s the most direct option it’s not necessarily the best approach in all situations. A direct confrontation is exactly what it sounds like; in this case, the bystander approaches the person who made the offending comment and explains why what they said is a problem, or how the comment made the bystander feel. You could choose to confront the situation right away or wait for a moment of privacy with this person. It could also be good to seek the support of another friend, especially if you worry that your approach will not be taken seriously.

The problem with direct confrontation, especially in terms of primary prevention, is that you may close the door to further conversation, or you may only redirect the inappropriate behavior. Suppose you confront a friend over his stereotyping comments about women. Your friend may refrain from using sexist language around you, if he continues around his other friends, he hasn’t changed his overall behavior. Your goal is to make whoever you’re approaching consider, even briefly, why his or her behavior is problematic with the hope of influencing future behavior.

a) Naming or acknowledging the offense.

Identifying an offense and giving a name to it means it isn’t glossed over or ignored. It lets someone know that you’re paying attention that you’re bothered by what’s been said. It may also open up opportunities for continued discussion. What this sounds like: Try to use “I” statements so you’re not begging for a fight. Try, “I feel like that’s blaming the victim,” or, “I feel like that’s not a fair way to look at women.” Experiment with statements that sound direct but not combative.

b) Make It Personal

This strategy can prevent an offender from distancing himself from the impact of his words or actions. What this sounds like: “I hope no one ever speaks that way to you,” or, “Dude, you have a sister.”

Example 1: You’re out with a group of your friends. As an attractive woman walks by, one of your friends makes a crass comment about her body. It’s possible that you could respond right away. But if this has been a pattern of behavior and you feel that a direct confrontation would be best, you might wait until you have a moment of privacy. You could also bring another friend along for support. In your own words, you might say something that sounds like: “This may seem surprisingly to you, but the comment you made at dinner about the woman we met seemed degrading to me, and it made me really uncomfortable. I know you, and I know that’s not what you really think about women. You’re better than that.” It helps to keep the confrontation positive. It can leave the door open for future conversations about these issues.

Example 2: Your coworker has a copy of today's paper on his desk. On the cover is an article about a fundraiser for the local domestic violence shelter. As your coworker reads the article, he rolls his eyes and says that anyone who'd return to an abusive husband would have to be stupid or crazy. This could be a good opportunity for a prompt and direct response. Here, your coworker seems distant from the issue but initiated the conversation, and it might be most natural for you to respond right away. You could say, "I feel as though it's tempting to want to hold victims responsible when they keep returning to the people who hurt them. But there really is a lot of understandable reasons why someone might stay." Try suggesting some of the many, many reasons. Or reframe the conversation and say something like, "Yeah, I know those questions come to mind when we hear about domestic violence, but maybe a better question would be why someone would think it's okay to harm or control someone they love."

Conclusion

When perpetrators commit unconscionable acts in public space (and to some degree in private), conversations in the community and media usually ask why no one did anything to intervene. The question generally seems almost rhetorical where few solutions are offered and guilt is fostered. If we genuinely evaluate the question of why bystander intervention is difficult we find that bystanders rarely intervene because we are never taught how and because, historically, there has been little social support for taking action. With the information provided here we hope to give individuals strategic ideas for how they can safely intervene to prevent violence. In addition, we hope to contribute community level conversations about equity and accountability in order to foster public safety.