

Being an active bystander

Active bystander – what do we mean?

An “Active bystander” is a person who takes positive action when they see something harmful happening – perhaps verbal abuse, a hate crime, or something else that puts others in danger.

We think that being an active bystander is everyone’s responsibility – whether in acute moments of danger or in the actions we take to tackle systemic injustices.

This handout outlines strategies for active bystanders who witness someone being harassed or attacked because of their perceived identity, such as their race, religion, gender, disability or sexual orientation.

The principles and strategies of intervention:

If you encounter identity-based prejudice, harassment or violence, such as racial abuse in the street, it can be hard to know what you should do in that moment to stand up for the victim. The below principles and techniques will help you know how you can best support victims and reduce harms.

Principles:

- **Be safe** - your personal safety is a priority, your response should not put you at an unreasonable risk. Remember that direct intervention is rarely the only option you have – if direct intervention is not safe, think about what else you can do
- **De-escalate** - your response should never aggravate the situation or do anything to put a victim at increased risk of harm
- **Victim centred** – alongside your own, the victim’s wellbeing should be at the centre of your approach



Strategies for intervention:

Join the victim

A powerful intervention strategy is to join the victim, perhaps by sitting with them, standing with them or by letting them know you are there for them. If you don't know the victim, make sure you introduce yourself, ask if they are okay, tell them you are there to help and support if they want you to, and tell them you will stay with them until they are safe.

Challenge the perpetrator

Call out negative behaviour and tell the person to stop. You should be polite and remember that sometimes a person does not know they are being offensive. Don't aggravate the situation, remain calm and state why something has offended you. It can be helpful to ask questions, "why are you saying/doing that?", "do you know how hurtful that is?". Stick to exactly what has happened, don't exaggerate. Often it is helpful to use "I feel" statements.

Distract the perpetrator

If neither joining the victim or challenging the perpetrator seems appropriate, perhaps you can interrupt in another way. Start a conversation with the perpetrator to allow their potential target to move away or have friends intervene. Perhaps come up with an idea to get the victim out of the situation – tell them they need to take a call, or you need to speak to them; any excuse to get them away to safety. Alternatively, try distracting, or redirecting the situation.

Ask for help

There is safety in numbers; sometimes others are looking for permission to get involved. Ask others around you to help you to intervene, e.g. "I think that person is in trouble, will you join me to check they are okay?". If you don't feel able to do anything, look for people in positions of authority who can help: the shop keeper, bus driver, teacher, bartender, security guard, etc.

Show solidarity

Sometimes you aren't able to do anything to stop an attack happening, perhaps because it isn't safe or because it happens too quickly. In these instances, showing solidarity with a victim after an attack is vital. Ask them if they are okay, see if there's anything you can do to help them. Make sure they know you think what happened to them is unacceptable. For many victims the sense that all witnesses agreed with the perpetrators can add to the harms of an attack.

Document evidence

Capturing or documenting evidence of the harassment or violence can help ensure perpetrators are brought to justice. This could mean taking phone numbers from other witnesses, noting car or bus numberplates, or a train carriage number. Only record on a mobile phone if you are certain that it will not escalate the situation and never post footage from a mobile phone on social media without the permission of a victim to do so.

Other things to consider

Timing

Think about the timing of any intervention. In moments of acute danger acting immediately is important, however in some situations, such as in a workplace you should consider whether immediate action is right for the victim's wellbeing. For example speaking up in the meeting with the victim present may cause more embarrassment for them.

Thinking about your own identities

You should also consider your own identities in any situation and how those identities may impact the outcome of your response. For example you might want to think about what power you hold, or not, in the particular context. Or think about how your identities impact your own safety or the sense of safety of the victim.

How to de-escalate aggressive or violent behaviour?

Recognising aggressive or violent behaviour

Someone who is getting angry may look tense and unhappy. You might notice them trembling or flushing red. They might also pace back and forth, snap at people, speak sarcastically, or raise their voice. Pay attention to their body language. Tight shoulders, clenched fists, pacing, and nervous twitching can all be signs that a person is about to become violent.

Keep your voice down

Even if the other person is shouting at you, respond to them as calmly as you can. If they are too worked up to communicate rationally, don't say anything until they quiet down a little. If you raise your voice, you'll only fuel the person's anger. Don't encourage them to fight.

Remain calm and avoid arguing

It is normal and common to get angry when dealing with an aggressive person. You can get upset emotionally and personally. However, getting upset cause more damage to the situation then help it.

Listen to the perpetrator

Listening to the aggressive person may seem like the last thing you'd want to do. However, it may be a crucial step to solving the problem. Bear in mind when de-escalating a situation the main thing you are doing is ensuring your own and the victim's safety—even though you don't agree with the perpetrator, sometimes you may need to listen and show empathy to prevent further harms.

Do not demand compliance

For example, "you must calm down" Saying something like "settle down" or "relax" will probably just make the person angrier. Instead, create a connection with the person by acknowledging their anger. Say something like, "it seems like this is bothering you. Can we talk about it?" or "I want to understand how you feel and I think that would be easier if we could talk instead of yelling"

Being aware of your own body language

Show a non-threatening, open stance. Avoid defensive body language such as crossed arms or clenched fists which could be interpreted as hostile. Remember about calm physical movements and respect the other's person personal space.

Proactive prevention of Identity based violence

Facilitating meaningful interactions between different people

Prejudice and division in communities can be overcome through long-term, meaningful interaction between different members of community. Meaningful interactions go beyond surface-level conversations, delving into shared interests, hopes, concerns, or even each other's differences.

By learning about one another through a purposeful connection, people can break down prejudices they might have had about one another and build common ground. Meaningful interactions cannot be forced as this will reduce willingness of participants to get to know one another. Similarly, events organised with the intention of promoting interaction for its own sake can be of limited use in bridging divides.

Building empathy

The ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, see things from their point of view, and imagine yourself in their place. Essentially, it is putting yourself in someone else's position. We can help others to understand the impact of their actions, or to understand the experiences of others. Perhaps this is explaining to a friend the very real hurt that prejudiced jokes can cause, or findings ways to show friends and colleagues interviews or testimony of a victims/survivors.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally, understanding the logical connection between ideas. Critical thinking might be described as the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. It is about being an active learner rather than a passive recipient of information.

We can support others to become more critical thinkers by provoking them with alternative sources of information that they may not be looking themselves. This is not about telling someone that they are wrong, but helping all of those around us to watch, read and listen to content that might help them to investigate different perspectives.



Tackling structural biases and marginalization:

There are barriers that can prevent some groups or individuals from being able to be equally involved in activities, to have a say in decisions which effect their lives, or to have their voices and concerns heard. While marginalized groups may be engaged with national and local issues, they might also think that these spaces or processes are not open to them due to issues such as historical lack of representation. This can make members of our communities feel even more alienated and excluded.

We should work in partnership with underrepresented groups to create spaces for everyone's views to be heard. In our projects, workplaces, groups and clubs we can actively ensure that we support those from less represented communities to become involved and place marginalised voices at the centre.

Sometimes we should give up our seat at the table and support somebody who wouldn't normally feel comfortable or may not normally be invited to take that space. But simply offering our space is not enough, we must also be thinking about how we can work together with those from marginalized communities to re-design those spaces, power structures and ways of working to ensure that all in it feel comfortable and able to participate equitably .

To get in touch with us

If you have any questions, or would like to talk with us more about this Active By-stander training, please get in touch. You can reach us on:

Email: education@protectionapproaches.org

Phone: + 44 (0) 20 3859 9509

Web: www.protectionapproaches.org

