

Why Bystanders Stand By

Adapted by Carolyn Brinkworth (carolyn@ucar.edu) from articles by Franklin Veaux¹ and A.V. Flox².

An important tool in the prevention of harassment, sexual or otherwise, is the role of the bystander - people who are not directly targeted, but see what is happening, or receive reports that something is wrong, and have a choice whether to deny the reports, ignore the situation, offer support to the target, or intervene. There is a raft of research on the tendency of bystanders to resist intervening, especially if there are multiple witnesses, or if no-one else speaks up. This “bystander effect” is incredibly powerful - not only does it cause people to stand by and do nothing while people are harassed or even assaulted in front of them, it has also been shown to affect whether individuals will leave a burning building or crashed airplane; no-one wants to be the first person to make a scene or rock the boat. There are also often very real power dynamics involved, where bystanders cannot speak up or fear of retribution or ostracization. The good news is that the bystander effect works both ways - once one person stands up, many more are likely to follow, and the risk to each individual is shared across the whole group.

Below is an edited article from author Franklin Veaux, synthesized with excellent commentary by A.V. Flox, and edited further to generalise to our community. It outlines some reasons for one aspect of the bystander effect - why people refuse to believe reports of harassment, or take action when they are reported. Understanding these reasons can be instrumental in changing a culture and encouraging everyone to be a positive bystander to protect the safety of everyone.

Failure modes for bystander intervention:

1. People want to believe that they're safe.

"I think it's often about creating an illusion of safety," Veaux writes. "By finding some way to blame a victim of a crime, we can protect ourselves, if only a little bit, from the fear of that crime. If you are a victim because you did something wrong, then I don't need to fear being a victim as long as I do things right. I don't need to worry about having my car stolen, because I'm smart enough not to park it in a dark corner of a parking lot. I won't be a rape victim, because I'm smart enough to know better than to wear that miniskirt or walk down that alley."

He goes on: "Reality doesn't line up with those assumptions, but that doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if women who dress modestly are just as likely, or more likely, as women who dress provocatively to be victims of rape. People will cling to beliefs that make them feel safer, even if those beliefs aren't true."

¹ <http://tacit.livejournal.com/359244.html>

² <https://plus.google.com/+AVFlox/posts/C21ictKTFyW?sfc=true>

2. People don't want to lose the benefits that a bad actor provides to them, or to speak out against powerful individuals for fear of backlash.

"Community leaders often become community leaders because they're willing to do things for people. They perform some kind of service that people benefit from. And people don't like losing that benefit," Veaux notes. In the sciences, they're often well respected, are networking hubs, and have positions of power within academic circles - power that translates into recommendations, collaborations, and jobs. Many people don't want to speak out against someone who holds this kind of power, with influence over careers and funding. Veaux continues: "That creates a powerful incentive for them to find reasons to discredit accusations of assault or other inappropriate behavior. Or, worse yet, if the perpetrator withdraws from the community, they can act like it's the victim's fault they're not getting that [networking or] education any more."

He continues: "So community leaders often find themselves in a position where there are fewer checks on their behavior, and where it is easy for them to be able to get away with inappropriate behavior. And that creates an environment where it is easy for a person in the role of a community leader to become a serial offender. Without checks on their behavior, they may feel free to commit assaults over and over again, with each victim believing that their assault is simply an isolated incident. The cost of coming forward means that few people are likely to come forward. The reluctance on the part of the community to acknowledge abuse means that those who do come forward may be discredited or dismissed. Together, these things become a recipe for an ongoing cycle of abuse."

3. People hate being uncomfortable.

The reminder that consent violations are serious things that cause real harm to people is an uncomfortable one. It's even more uncomfortable to consider that someone we know and respect has done something like this. It is much easier to find reasons to excuse the behavior so we don't have to deal with the ethical implications of holding a friend accountable, and the self-interrogation about the ways we may have colluded in abuse up until that point.

So we say that boundaries were fuzzy. We say that consent is complicated. We say that can't really know what happened, so it's not our responsibility to do anything, even something as simple as giving emotional support to a person who has been hurt. We say the victim didn't say no. We say the victim might have hallucinated the assault. We say the perpetrator might have hallucinated the consent. We say the people involved are adults, and they can take care of this on their own. We say we're not qualified to deal with this. We say we're talking the higher road by being "like Switzerland" and "not taking sides."

We say a lot of cowardly things. And the sad thing about this is that it's incredibly easy to do it. The "higher road" we like to refer to in these cases has an elevator; it is paved and incredibly easy to walk. It has no ethical implications and no action items. It is cowardice itself, a lovely stroll with zero consequences for a bystander.