

## **Bystander Intervention: A strategy for improved campus safety**

### A Typical Situation

A young freshmen coed is invited to an off-campus party, where upper classmen provide beer and a “punch” concocted of fruit juices, several types of liquor, and grain alcohol. With everyone drinking, she does too and becomes intoxicated. She goes outside to get some air, followed by a male student. He says she is sexy and starts kissing her. She tells him to stop, but he continues, and now begins to fondle her. He attempts to remove her clothing, along with his own, and insists the coed engage in sexual relations. Eventually, she leaves, but is extremely upset. She feels dirty, ashamed, and afraid. She does not want to “tattle” on the male and she doesn’t want to acknowledge to college police and administrators she had broken the law (underage drinking) and violated the school’s alcohol policy. She is afraid of a bad reputation and being treated like a pariah.

Over the next two months, the victim is unable to sleep, and eats poorly. She withdraws from her closest friends and stops attending class because she fears seeing her assailant. She loses weight, has trouble interacting with males in her classes, and finally drops out of school. When asked by a counselor for the reason, she recounts her story. Exactly eight weeks after the event, the police are notified.

### Disturbing Statistics

Sadly, such events transpire every day at American colleges and universities. More disturbing is the fact that these assaults are common long before students reach college. A 1993 study found 20% of high school students had experienced forced sex (rape). However, only 5% of rapes nationwide are ever reported to police, and the reporting of other sexual crimes isn’t much higher.

Sexual assault on our campuses is an epidemic. Consider the following:

- Approximately 25% of college women will experience an attempted and/or completed rape, usually (almost 70% of the time) by someone known to the victim.
- Almost 40% of sexual assault victims are minors.
- Up to 70% of all sexual assaults involve alcohol consumption by the perpetrator and/or victim.
- Almost 10% of women will be stalked at least once in their lifetimes, for an average of 2 years, and more than 75% of female homicide victims were stalked prior to their deaths.

### The Police are not the Answer!

Over the years, the police have responded with strategies to keep women safe. We teach self-defense classes; offer escorts to vehicles; present sexual assault briefings; distribute safety tips; present briefings on the dangers of alcohol and drugs; and provide contact information on college counseling, victim advocacy, sexual assault and mental health services, among other

initiatives. The common theme above is we essentially require the potential victim to protect herself, by avoiding circumstances where sexual assault may occur, and to be responsible for managing the crisis after the assault occurs. These programs are good, but they are not enough. For the most part, they do not prevent destructive behavior from occurring.

What we need is a means of enlisting our clients, the very people we protect, to protect each other. We need to establish a sense of empowerment for individuals to protect each other. We want to enlist young people to be allies for social justice. After all, good and decent people are inclined to do the right thing and they greatly outnumber sexual predators. The challenge is to get the first few people, the “bystanders”, to take action when they see any type of violence, including bullying, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and dating or domestic violence. Once one advocate takes action, others are likely to join him or her on behalf of the potential victim.

### Bystander Intervention Defined

Bystanders are the largest group of people associated with violence. They are neither perpetrators nor victims, but they greatly outnumber both. Unlike the police, in most instances, they are often present where a specific assault is happening or about to happen. Bystanders, through the use of peer pressure, can stop these assaults through learned strategies and get help for the victimized.

NOVA police teach bystander intervention. The training identifies three main strategies and several techniques to intervene in a toxic situation. First, **separate the perpetrator and the potential victim**. Tell them your concerns and reasons for intervening, and that you are a friend acting in their best interests before matters get out of control. Make sure each party gets home safely. In the scenario at the beginning of this article, an individual at the party could have intervened and stated he (or she) was worried about the female’s well-being because she was drunk. He could have told the perpetrator she was underage and that he was placing himself in serious legal (not to mention morale) jeopardy by taking advantage of her in her helpless state. As a second strategy, he could **recruit friends of both the potential perpetrator and victim** to step in as a group to separate the two and get them home safely. Finally, a bystander could **use distraction to redirect the focus** to someone or somewhere else. For instance, he could approach the aggressor or the victim and say “Hey, I need to talk with you” or “This party is lame. Let’s go somewhere else.”

There are many scenarios, and not exclusively sexual in nature, in which a bystander can make a difference. For instance, 1) you see a friend going home with someone when your friend is drunk or high; 2) while walking to your car, you observe a male with clenched fists talking to a female; 3) you are in class and before class starts, you hear a fellow student use disparaging remarks about or toward an ethnic or racial group; 4) you notice a fellow student being picked on because of his or her sexual orientation; and 5) a friend shows you nude photographs of a classmate. The number of scenarios, especially in this age of social media, is almost endless.

The ultimate goal of bystander intervention is to defuse immediate situations and, more importantly, create a culture of compassion and assistance on campus. There are specific ways in which bystanders can make a difference:

- Believe someone who discloses a sexual assault, abusive relationship, or experience with stalking or bullying.
- Protect your friends and fellow students. If you see someone who appears to be in trouble, ask if they are OK.
- Speak up. If someone, to include a friend, says something derogatory, offensive or abusive, let them know this behavior is wrong and you don't want to be around it. Challenge your peers to be respectful by your own good example.

There is no single strategy or technique that works for all scenarios and all people at all stages of a problematic event. In our presentations, we should ask what if: the perpetrator tells you to go to hell, or the victim is too drunk to understand what you are saying, or you are physically afraid of taking action and then discuss alternative courses of action. Enlisting audience opinions is an important part of the learning process.

### A Final Thought

There is a compelling quote by German pastor Martin Niemoller at the Holocaust Museum in which he excoriates the German intellectuals who never spoke out against Adolph Hitler's rise to power and his insidious agenda.

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

All of NOVA's community members can have a beneficial effect upon the safety, security and wellbeing of each other. It just takes a commitment to doing what's right, and a little courage. Individually and together, we can make a difference.

For additional information on bystander intervention, contact NOVA Police (703-764-5000) or Student Mental Health and Behavior (which includes Sexual Assault Services and NOVA Cares) at 703-323-2136..