

Accountability: I've been called out for my behaviour

Hearing that you have hurt someone can be very uncomfortable. It's completely normal to feel defensive or upset when a peer points out that your behaviour has hurt them. Your immediate instinct might be to pull away, deny it, or say, 'It was just a joke.'

The people around you, especially your friends or peers, might hold you accountable for your harmful behaviour. Being accountable means owning what happened and taking responsibility for it, rather than making excuses. This is not because your friends want to silence or punish you. Often, it's because they value the relationship and believe in your ability to grow and do better. They are giving you a chance to make things right.

However, in the middle of a tense moment, it can be hard to recognise that this is what accountability looks like. You might mistake a boundary for an attack.

The following scenarios explore what these moments look like in real life, and how they feel from the inside. They also explore how you can start moving towards a helpful response.

Scenario 1: The classroom 'joke'

Leo is a Year 10 student who is generally well-liked and considers himself the class clown. He loves making people laugh and thrives on the energy of a loud, chaotic classroom. Right now, he is sitting in his third-period English class, surrounded by his usual friend group.

For the past few weeks, Leo has been aiming a running joke at Sam, a quieter classmate who sits near the front. It started with a silly comment about Sam's presentation to the class, but it evolved into Leo making a sarcastic comment every time Sam speaks up.

Today, the teacher is distracted just as Leo mimics Sam's voice. Maya, one of Leo's close friends, turns around. Instead of laughing, she looks annoyed.'

'Leo, seriously, stop,' she says quietly but firmly. 'It's not funny anymore. You're just picking on him every single day, and it's getting mean.'

Leo feels his face getting hot. His chest tightens. His internal thoughts race: 'I'm just messing around! Sam knows I'm joking. Why is Maya being the joke police and trying to make me look like a bad guy in front of everyone?' He can feel his friends watching to see how he reacts.

Leo is at a crossroads. His instinct is to laugh it off mockingly or snap back at Maya to defend his reputation. But looking past Maya, he catches a glimpse of Sam, who is staring fixedly at his desk, looking completely miserable. Leo realises his 'harmless' jokes might actually be harmful, and Maya is calling him out on it. Leo needs to figure out how to handle his intense embarrassment and fix this without making the situation worse. What does he do next to process this and make it right?

Accountability reflection:

- How did Leo's perception of his 'jokes' differ from how they were actually impacting Sam?
- What specific behaviour did Maya point out to Leo?
- What else might help in this scenario?

'...bravery in the face of bullying doesn't always look like a big dramatic stand, but sometimes it's just refusing to let someone be invisible.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Scenario 2: A group chat gets out of hand

Chloe is 15 and spends a lot of her time on her phone, contributing in a close-knit group chat with six of her friends. The chat is usually a private space for things like sharing memes, venting about parents, or discussing school drama. Chloe is currently in her bedroom, scrolling through the chat after dinner.

A few days ago, a girl from another school, Nina, made a post on another app that Chloe thought was cringey. Chloe screenshotted it, dropped it into the group chat, and wrote a sharp, mocking caption. Over the next 48 hours, Chloe kept it going, sending edited photos of Nina and encouraging the group to leave snake emojis on Nina's public profile.

At first, everyone participated, but this evening, the chat went completely quiet for two hours. Chloe's friend, Jordan, then texts the group: 'Hey guys, this is getting out of hand. Nina hasn't been at school for two days. This feels less like venting and more like straight-up cyberbullying. We need to delete the thread and stop.'

Two other friends 'heart' Jordan's message. Chloe feels a sick sensation in her stomach. Panic and anger compete inside her: 'Cyberbullying? Me? I was just sharing a public video. Everyone else was laughing too! Why is Jordan pointing the finger at me like I'm a monster?' Chloe feels isolated and cornered by her own friends.

Chloe's fingers hover over her phone. She wants to type a defensive rant, leave the group chat entirely, or text another friend on the side to talk trash about Jordan. But the word 'cyberbullying' stays with her, and she realises the group's mood has changed completely because of her actions. Instead of reacting out of anger, Chloe realises she needs to step back and find a way to unpack what she has done. Who can she turn to for an honest, outside perspective on how to figure out her part in this?

Accountability reflection:

- Why do you think being called out makes Chloe feel such strong physical and emotional reactions, even when the feedback is accurate?
- If you realised that an online thread you started had become harmful, what are the immediate, practical steps that you could take? Think about how to be accountable, support the person who was hurt, and repair trust with your friends.

'If a young person is helped to understand the human impact of what they've done, they can learn to apologise, listen, empathise and repair harm.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 18, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Scenario 3: The boundary on the field

Marcus is a passionate 17-year-old regional soccer player. The field is his domain. He's competitive, driven and highly focused on winning. It is Tuesday night and the team is packing up their gear in the locker room after a tough training session.

A month ago, a new player named Tariq joined the club. Tariq is still learning the team's specific playstyle and has made a few high-profile mistakes during drills. Marcus, frustrated by anything that slows the team down, begins to freeze Tariq out. He doesn't pass to him during practice, doesn't include him in pre-game huddles and subtly encourages the other senior players to ignore Tariq's texts in the team's carpool chat.

As Marcus is tying his laces, the team captain, Isaac, walks over and sits on the bench next to him. 'Hey man, we need to talk about Tariq,' Isaac says quietly. 'You're icing him out and the rest of the guys are following your lead.'

It's freezing him out of the team completely. It's toxic, Marcus. You're supposed to be a leader here, not a gatekeeper.'

Marcus freezes. He prides himself on being a dedicated teammate. He immediately gets defensive, his thoughts spinning: 'I'm just maintaining standards! If Tariq can't handle the pressure, he shouldn't be playing competitive sports. Isaac is being too soft.' But Isaac's words hit hard, and a heaviness hangs in the air.

Accountability reflection:

- Why was it important for Isaac to confront Marcus privately, rather than ignoring the behaviour or calling him out in front of the whole team?
- Have you ever seen someone recognise what they have done and change their behaviour after being called out? What was it that helped them change?
- Take a moment to reflect on one small way you can pause next time your own defences flare up when receiving tough feedback.

'It's all well and good to get emotional support, but we need to build communities that allow people to take action and get the help they need.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

When someone tells you that your actions have caused them harm, your brain often treats it like an emergency. You immediately want to protect yourself, which can lead to confusion, denial or a strong urge to fight back. It is incredibly difficult to think clearly when you are feeling cornered or exposed.

This flowchart provides a practical, step-by-step roadmap for those moments. Its purpose is to help you pause, process your emotions safely and figure out your next move.

1

Someone has told you that your behaviour has caused harm (this could be a friend, a peer, a teacher, a parent or carer, or a school leader).

First, take a breath and notice how you are feeling.

Then, honestly ask yourself, 'Did I cause harm?'

- Yes:** 'I feel disappointed in myself or ashamed because I can see that I've caused harm.'
- No:** 'I feel angry and defensive. I didn't do it. They're overreacting, and it's not my fault.'

2

Did I cause harm?

Yes

No

Acknowledging that you may have caused harm to someone takes courage. It's a great first step.

3

Are you ready to take the next step and be accountable for your actions?

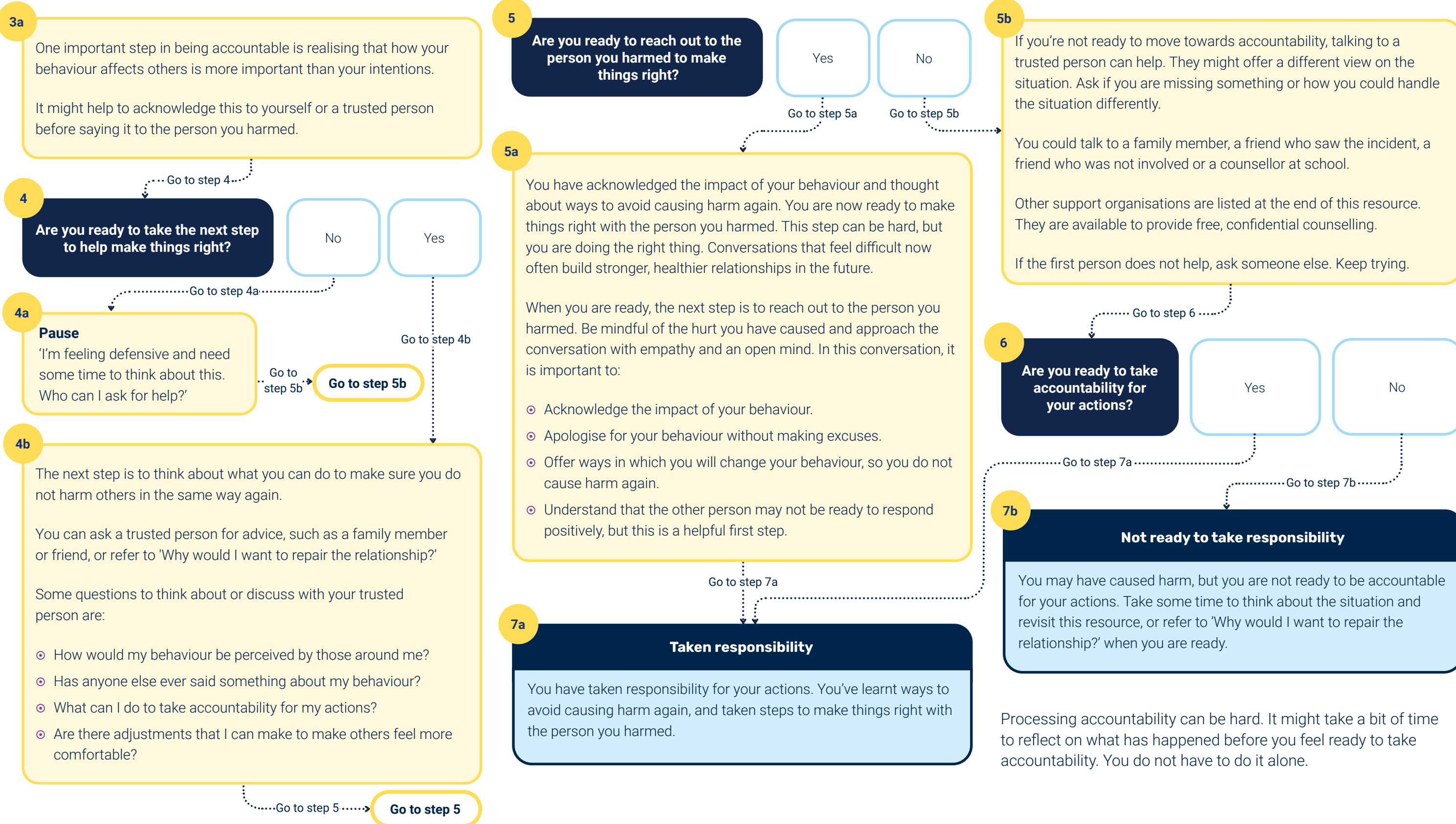
Yes

No

Go to step 3a

Go to step 4a

Years 8 and above



Where to get more help

If you need further support, help is available:

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au. Free, confidential counselling for bullying and other harmful behaviours, school issues, online harm and wellbeing, available 24/7.

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au. Mental health support for stress, anxiety or overwhelm, available 24/7.

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au. Crisis support and counselling if things feel overwhelming, available 24/7.

Dolly's Dream Bullying Support Line: 13 36 55 (13 DOLLY) or dollysdream.org.au. Counselling and guidance for children and young people experiencing bullying and other harmful behaviour, available 24/7.

headspace/ehedspace: 1800 650 890 or headspace.org.au. Mental health, wellbeing and early intervention support, available 9 am–1 am daily.

1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732 or 1800respect.org.au. Sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling line for anyone who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault, available 24/7.

13YARN: 13 92 76 or 13yarn.org.au. Culturally safe 24/7 support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

QLife (LGBTIQA+ young people): 1800 184 527 or qlife.org.au. Free, anonymous peer support and referral service, available 3 pm–9 pm daily.

eSafety Commissioner: esafety.gov.au. Report cyberbullying, get advice and request content removal support.

Australian Human Rights Commission: humanrights.gov.au. Support for cases involving discriminatory harm. Reports can be made via their website or by emailing infoservice@humanrights.gov.au.

Connected resources

- Why would I want to repair the relationship?

'Taking responsibility looks like feeling genuine remorse for your actions and communicating that you are sorry and then giving them space.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

State, territory and non-government education sectors will reflect the expectations of the National Framework for Addressing Bullying in Australian schools in their policies and procedures by Term 1 2027. This includes making reasonable efforts to initiate a response to bullying and harmful behaviour within 2 school days, recognising that further time may be required to fully address the issue. By Term 1 2027, all schools will also publish or link to policies and procedures that align with the National Framework (or equivalent contemporary jurisdiction specific frameworks) and their local policies and school context.