



Australian Government



Years 8 and above

Understanding the bystander effect

It can feel hard to step in when you see someone being targeted by bullying and other harmful behaviours like exclusion or mean comments. People often freeze or stay silent in moments like these. You don't have to be one of these people if you understand the behaviour going on and what might help.

What is the bystander effect?

The bystander effect is when a person is less likely to help someone in need if other people are present. Research has shown that the larger the crowd is, the less likely any single person is to step forward and help.

The bystander effect can happen in peer environments where the pressure to fit in and the risk of standing out can make it feel hard to speak up about harmful behaviour.

People do not stand by because they do not care or because they lack empathy. There are psychological reasons that your default response is to do nothing. Judging yourself or others for freezing is not helpful. Instead, naming these patterns is the key to breaking them. Understanding what keeps you stuck can help you find ways to change it.

'Bystanders enable the bully to keep going and have a hand in convincing the victim that they are alone.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE



Statistics

- ◉ **At school:** Research shows that peers witness 85% of bullying and other harmful behaviour incidents at school.
- ◉ **Online:** According to data from the eSafety Commissioner, 39% of youth cyberbullying incidents occur in online group chats. This puts a lot of young people in the role of digital bystander.

'Most bystanders aren't absent ... they're waiting for someone else to move first.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Why does the bystander effect happen?

Two main psychological patterns drive the bystander effect. They trick your brain into staying frozen.

1. Assuming someone else will act

When one person witnesses someone in trouble, they feel a responsibility to act. When other people are around, that sense of personal responsibility is divided, or 'diffused', across the entire group. Everyone silently assumes that someone else will say something or report it. Because everyone is waiting for someone else to take the first step, no one does.

- ◉ **In real life:** A classmate is being repeatedly teased or excluded on the oval at lunchtime. Dozens of students are sitting nearby, watching. Because there are so many witnesses, each student tells themselves, 'Someone else will stick up for them,' or 'A teacher will see it soon.'
- ◉ **Online:** Someone posts an offensive meme targeting one person in a large group chat or a gaming channel. Because 40 other people are in the chat, everyone assumes that if it is a problem, someone else will step in and say something.

Statistics

According to the eSafety Commissioner, young people often deal with toxic group chats by scrolling past or staying quiet. They mistake the lack of negative reactions as approval of the behaviour.



2. Assuming that silence means agreement

When people are in an uncomfortable situation, they look to others to work out how to respond. Because everyone is trying to look calm, the group's silence sends a false sign. You could look at the quiet crowd and think, 'Well, nobody else looks concerned, so this must just be banter. I guess it's not that serious.'

Privately, everyone might be feeling uncomfortable. But because no one is showing it, everyone assumes their own discomfort is wrong.

- ◉ **In real life:** A joke in class starts crossing the line into a personal attack. You feel a knot in your stomach, but you look around and see that no one is reacting. People are looking at their desks, pretending they didn't hear the joke, or they have completely blank expressions. You mistake their awkward silence for agreement.
- ◉ **Online:** A group chat is filling up with mean comments. Some of the comments are crossing the line, but no one is doing anything to stop it. It seems like the group is okay with it, so you think you might be overreacting. You don't want to be the one to ruin the group dynamic or make people feel bad for what they've posted, so you stay quiet.

'...a person is less likely to help someone else when there are more people around because they put that pressure or that responsibility on someone else ... However, afterwards I feel a sense of regret or shame because I feel like if I saw and understood the situation, I should not rely on other people when I have the responsibility to help that person.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 15, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE



The emotional experience of a passive bystander

Passive bystanders often feel guilt, regret or discomfort after they leave the situation. That discomfort can be useful — it shows you that your actions didn't match your values. Instead of feeling ashamed, treat this feeling as a signal to respond differently next time.

How to recognise the bystander effect

The first step is noticing when the bystander effect is in action. You are likely caught in the bystander trap if you find yourself doing something like this:

- ◉ **Waiting for someone else to act:** Thinking, 'I'll say something if someone else speaks up first.'
- ◉ **Explaining it away:** Telling yourself, 'If it were actually bullying, a teacher would have stepped in by now,' or 'They aren't crying, so they must think it's funny.'
- ◉ **Feeling the 'freeze':** Experiencing physical discomfort, like a knot in your stomach or a sudden urge to look away, while doing nothing.
- ◉ **Lurking online:** Seeing harmful content online but choosing not to say anything or report it because you assume another member of the chat will take care of it.

Note

The term 'upstander' in this resource is in line with the findings of the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review Report. An upstander is someone who chooses to act positively and safely to support a person being bullied or harmed and upholds values of kindness and empathy.

Shifting the momentum: acting together

A bystander is different to an upstander.

Even one small act can help support a person being harmed. It can also help shift a group dynamic from bystanders to upstanders.

- ◉ **The power of people:** The bystander effect loses its power when people act in pairs or small groups. If you are worried about acting alone, quietly check in with someone next to you: 'This is getting out of hand. Do you want to say something with me?' Naming that shared discomfort makes it much easier and safer to act together.
- ◉ **The 10-second rule:** Research shows that when an upstander steps in, the bullying or other harmful behaviour usually stops within 10 seconds.
- ◉ **Calming things down:** Stepping in doesn't need to turn into a confrontation. It can involve subtle, low-risk actions, such as:
 - ◉ refusing to laugh at or share harmful content
 - ◉ creating a distraction to remove the target from the situation
 - ◉ sending a private, supportive message to the target after the incident.

Next steps

Want to know what doing something different actually looks like in practice? See 'What does courage look like?' – this resource walks you through small acts of courage that you can do without putting yourself at risk.

Connected resources

- ◉ What does courage look like?
- ◉ Understanding peer norms

Where to get more help

If you need further support, help is available:

'It's okay not to have all the solutions and immediately step in if someone is being bullied! Sometimes just showing them that you're there and you care can mean the world.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

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/ehespace: 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.

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 two 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.