

Bystanders: Passive or Active? We have the potential for both.

By Leslie Aguilar



Expert Forum



Why do we sometimes stand by silently when we witness something we feel is wrong? What separates passive bystanders from those who get involved?

Psychologists have been seeking these answers for over four decades. In 1964, Kitty Genovese was brutally murdered outside of her apartment in Queens, NY. Thirty-eight people heard or saw the crime. Not one phoned the police or intervened in any way. The seemingly apathetic bystanders prompted psychologists to delve into the minds of individuals who witness a dangerous situation yet fail to act. Some of the researchers include John Darley and Bibb Latané, Daniel Batson, Ervin Staub, Charles Garfield, Pearl and Samuel Oliner, and Kristen Monroe. (For a fuller description of their bystander research, [click here](#).)

Their research points to multiple reasons a bystander may or may not get involved. The "bystander effect" means that the more bystanders involved in a situation, the less likely any one individual is to intervene. The "diffusion of responsibility" theory suggests an individual witnessing a dangerous situation feels less personally responsible to take action when there are other people present who are capable of responding. Research has also shown that people are most likely to help someone they perceive as similar to themselves, such as someone of the same race or ethnic group. Women — particularly those perceived as attractive or femininely dressed — seem to receive more help than men.

Bystanders are influenced by the reaction of other bystanders. In a study which simulated an emergency, the passive bystanders showed "pluralistic ignorance" — the tendency to mistake one another's calm demeanor as a sign that no emergency is actually taking place. In another study, the primary determinant in whether someone helped another person in distress was whether he or she was late to a commitment.

So, there are many factors that influence bystanders to remain passive. But what about those individuals who do actively get involved? What leads them to become active bystanders rather than passive witnesses. Ervin Staub survived the Holocaust because someone did speak up and take action. Today Dr. Staub studies those who take action in grave situations. Staub found that when a bystander discounts the importance of intervening, most other individuals will remain passive. However, when one bystander suggests that action is needed, many people are willing to offer help.

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In Dr. Staub's words, "It showed me the power of bystanders to define the meaning of events in a way that leads people to take responsibility."

Dr. Staub reminds us of the immense power we each have when we speak up as bystanders. It doesn't have to be an emergency. Most of us witness hurtful comments, exclusion, stereotypes and perhaps even discrimination in our everyday lives. So, go ahead. Use your voice.

Sources: "We Are All Bystanders," [Greater Good](#) magazine, Fall / Winter 2006-07 | Bystander Psychology: Studying the Pivotal Role of Bystander by Ervin Staub (The Southern Institute for Education and Research Deathly Silence Teaching Guide)

Key Concepts

Passive Bystander: A person who witnesses a problem, considers some kind of positive action, then responds by doing nothing.

Active Bystander: The person who witnesses an emergency, recognizes it as such, and takes it upon him or herself to do something about it.

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