

# Domestic Violence Awareness: Bystander Intervention

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Family Advocacy Program

Each October, Domestic Violence Awareness Month is observed to shine a light on the often-hidden reality of domestic violence. It's a time to raise awareness, support survivors, and educate the public about the role we all play in ending the cycle of abuse. One of the most effective, yet underutilized, ways we can make a difference is through **bystander intervention**.

Bystanders, individuals who witness or are aware of domestic violence, hold incredible power to intervene and potentially stop violence before it escalates. Yet, many people hesitate to act, often unsure of what to do or afraid of making the situation worse. This FAP/chat explores why bystander intervention matters and offers practical ways to step in safely and effectively.

## Understanding Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a complex issue that affects individuals and families regardless of their backgrounds, and the military community is no exception. Within the Department of Defense, domestic violence may involve service members or civilians, making it a concern that impacts both military readiness and the well-being of personnel. It encompasses physical, emotional, psychological, and financial abuse within intimate relationships, and its effects can ripple through our families and communities. Domestic violence affects people of all genders, races, and socio-economic backgrounds. Victims often find themselves isolated and powerless, unable to seek help due to fear, manipulation, or shame.

## Bystander

A bystander is someone who is present at a particular event or situation but is not directly involved in it. Bystanders are observers or onlookers who witness an incident or activity without actively participating in it. The term is often used in various contexts, including:

1. **Social situations:** In social psychology, bystanders are individuals who witness events like bullying, harassment, or emergencies but do not intervene or take action. This concept is related to the bystander effect, which suggests that people are less likely to offer help or take action when they are in a group because they assume someone else will do it.
2. **Accidents and emergencies:** Bystanders at the scene of an accident or emergency may observe the situation without directly getting involved. However, they can play a crucial role by calling for help, providing information to first responders, or offering assistance if they are trained to do so.
3. **Crime and legal matters:** Bystanders may be witnesses to a crime but are not directly involved in it. They may be called upon to testify in court to provide information about what they saw or heard.
4. **Protests and demonstrations:** Bystanders can be individuals who are present at a protest or demonstration but are not actively participating as protesters or counter-protesters.

In various situations, bystanders can have a significant impact, whether through their actions, inaction, or testimony, depending on the circumstances and their willingness to get involved.

### **How a Bystander Can Intervene:**

Bystander intervention is a concept rooted in the belief that everyone has a role to play in preventing and addressing domestic violence. Again, bystanders are individuals who witness potentially harmful situations but are not directly involved. You have the power to make a positive impact by taking action, thus breaking the cycle of silence and complicity.

### **Why Bystander Intervention Matters**

Domestic violence often happens behind closed doors, making it difficult for others to recognize or respond. But for many victims, subtle signs of abuse are visible to friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues. Bystanders may notice unexplained injuries, frequent arguments, controlling behaviors, or changes in a person's demeanor. Intervening as a bystander can make a profound difference in the life of someone experiencing domestic violence. When bystanders act, they not only disrupt the violence but can also:

1. Provide support and validation to the victim, letting them know they are not alone.
2. Prevent further abuse by alerting authorities or connecting the victim with resources.
3. Raise awareness and change social norms, reinforcing that domestic violence is unacceptable.

### **Barriers to Bystander Intervention**

Despite the potential for positive impact, there are reasons why bystanders may feel hesitant to intervene. They include fear of retaliation from the abuser. An uncertainty about how to help or what steps to take. A belief that it's a private matter. Even misunderstanding the severity of the situation, assuming the victim is exaggerating, or the abuser will change. These are valid concerns, but there are ways to intervene that prioritize both safety and support.

### **Practical Bystander Intervention Strategies**

Bystander intervention doesn't mean jumping into a dangerous situation or confronting an abuser directly. Instead, it involves taking thoughtful and strategic actions that can protect the victim and prevent further harm. Here are some effective bystander intervention strategies:

1. **Create a Distraction:** If you witness a volatile situation, creating a distraction can interrupt the cycle of abuse without directly confronting the abuser.

For example:

- Interrupt the conversation by starting a neutral one, such as asking for directions or checking on someone nearby.
- Knock on the door or ring the doorbell if you're aware of a domestic dispute next door. This can break the tension and give the victim a moment to step away.

- Divert attention by offering the victim an excuse to leave the situation (e.g., “Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?” or “I need your help with something.”).
2. **Offer Support to the Victim:** If you suspect someone is in an abusive relationship, reach out to offer your support. Approach the situation with empathy and without judgment.

Examples include:

- **Check in privately:** Ask if they are okay and if there’s anything they want to talk about.
  - **Believe and listen:** If they open up, believe them. Victims often fear they won’t be taken seriously.
  - **Provide information:** Gently share information about domestic violence hotlines, shelters, or support groups. Let them know they have options but avoid pressuring them to act before they are ready.
3. **Speak Out Publicly:** If you’re in a public setting and witness behaviors that suggest abuse (such as verbal threats or intimidation), you can:
- **Voice your disapproval:** Without escalating the situation, calmly express that the behavior is unacceptable (e.g., “That’s not okay.” or “Please stop—this isn’t right.”).
  - **Involve others:** If you feel unsafe intervening alone, ask others nearby for support or involve authority figures like security personnel.
4. **Call for Help:** If the situation is clearly dangerous, do not hesitate to call 911 or local authorities. Domestic violence can escalate quickly, and by calling for help, you could save a life. You don’t need to have all the details or know exactly what’s happening—trust your instincts. Here’s how you can safely call for help:
- Keep your distance and remain safe but provide as much information as possible to the authorities.
  - Stay on the line until help arrives if possible.
5. **Use Resources and Refer:** If you’re not comfortable intervening directly, you can still play an essential role by connecting the victim to resources. Share the contact information of local domestic violence shelters, hotlines, or counselors.

Some key resources include:

- The National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
- Local shelters or support services within your community.
- Family Advocacy Program (FAP) for military families, which offers counseling, crisis intervention, and advocacy.
- Magellan EAP Services.

## When NOT to Intervene Directly

It's important to recognize that intervening in domestic violence situations can be dangerous. Confronting an abuser directly can escalate the violence, putting both the bystander and the victim at risk. In these cases, it's better to:

- Create space for the victim to escape if possible.
- Call for help rather than trying to handle the situation on your own.
- Avoid escalating tension, as this could lead to more harm for the victim.

## Shifting the Culture

Bystander intervention is not just about reacting in the moment—it's also about shifting societal norms to create a culture where domestic violence is not tolerated. Here's how you can contribute:

- **Challenge harmful beliefs:** Speak out against victim-blaming and the normalization of abusive behavior.
- **Support survivors publicly:** Whether through social media, community events, or conversations, show solidarity with victims and survivors.
- **Educate yourself and others:** Learn more about domestic violence, including its warning signs and the impact it has on families. Share this knowledge with others to help create a more informed and proactive community.

Domestic violence thrives in silence and secrecy, but bystander intervention can help break this cycle. Whether you choose to create a distraction, offer support, or call for help, your actions can make a profound difference. During Domestic Violence Awareness Month, let's emphasize our commitment to creating a safe and respectful environment for all. By fostering a culture of awareness, responsibility, and support, we can make significant strides in preventing domestic violence and ensuring the well-being of our service members and civilian personnel and families. This October let's stand together and make a difference in the lives of survivors and those at risk. Together, we can contribute to a stronger, more resilient military community. As a reminder, assistance is available. Reach out to your Employee Assistance Program, Military Oncesource, or contact the **Family Advocacy Program at 717-770-7066** for more information.