How to Be an Active Bystander When You See Casual Racism

The New York Times

October 29, 2020 Thursday 10:44 EST

Section: SMARTER-LIVING

Length: 1771 words

Byline: Ruth Terry

Highlight: A few small actions can go a long way.

Body

How to Be an Active Bystander When You See Casual Racism

We've all been there.

At a dinner party. In line at the post office. On a Zoom meeting. You can feel it coming: that awful joke your friend likes to tell about immigrants. Questions like "Don't all lives matter?" or "Did he resist arrest?" The discomfort becomes palpable. Your gut twists. God, I hope someone says something, you think with increasing desperation. And so does everyone else.

This phenomenon, in which no one in a group of witnesses chooses to disrupt a problematic event, is called the bystander effect, said Thomas Vance, a national certified counselor and a postdoctoral psychology fellow at the New School for Social Research in New York.

"We like to think that we live in a world where people will jump in," Dr. Vance said in an email, but "the greater the number of people present, the less likely people are to help a person in need or distress."

"This happens because being part of a large crowd makes it so no single person has to take responsibility for an action," he added.

This diffusion of responsibility can make well-intentioned people complicit in whatever acts of violence or discrimination they silently witness.

To avoid that silent complicity, people can learn to become active bystanders: individuals who work to create cultures that actively reject harmful or discriminatory behavior through targeted interventions.

What exactly is an active bystander?

First, let's talk about the difference between an ally and an active bystander.

An ally is someone who "does not suffer the same oppressions" as you do but who "supports your struggle for rights and freedom," Micki McElya, a history professor at the University of Connecticut, wrote in the Boston Review.

Absent from that definition is action. Active bystanders see something bad happen and make discreet choices to respond to the concerning behavior, said Monica Reyna, a violence prevention educator at the Advocates, a nonprofit in rural Idaho. That can take many forms, such as recording suspected police brutality or challenging everyday microaggressions like dinner-table racism. It can be leaning into humor to unpack “compliments” — for example, your boss describes a Black colleague as “articulate,” the subtext being that this is somehow exceptional — or educating friends about the problematic origins of commonplace expressions.

What do I do?

To beat the bystander effect, we have to retrain our brains and establish new patterns of behavior. Fortunately, there’s no shortage of ways to do this.

“We began to categorize all of the anti-bias actions that could be taken,” said Derald Wing Sue, a professor at Columbia who studies the psychology of racism and antiracism and has written extensively about microaggression theory. “There were literally thousands of them.”

One of the most effective tactics, Dr. Sue said, is what he calls the art of the comeback.

“A person will say to me, ‘You speak excellent English,’ and I will say, ‘You do, too, John!’” said Dr. Sue, who is Chinese-American. “The ‘compliment’ has a hidden communication to me that I’m a perpetual alien in my own country, I’m not a true American.” He said that “by simply reversing it, it may have a humorous or sarcastic impact” that reveals the comment’s underlying meaning.

Dorothy J. Edwards, president and founder of Alteristic, a nonprofit consultancy that provides bystander training, focuses on “the three D’s”: direct, distract and delegate.

“We emphasize that ‘direct’ doesn’t have to be combative or confrontational; it just means you address the situation directly,” Dr. Edwards said. This can be as simple as “checking in on the person at risk” by asking if the person is OK or telling the perpetrator to “knock it off.”

Even your physical presence can be enough to keep someone from being the target of racial violence, said LaVonne Pepe, a social worker and a senior trainer at Alteristic.

If you witness a concerning event that may escalate into harm, Dr. Edwards recommends creating a diversion. For example, suggest going to get food. Or tell a white lie: Say someone’s car is being towed. Interrupt a heated discussion by asking for a phone charger. Doing so can help to de-escalate a situation and give the person on the receiving end of the behavior a chance to exit the scene.

Delegation is even easier: Enlist the help of that one friend who actually likes direct confrontation or has the clout to absorb any pushback. The idea is to just do something, whatever that may be.

Why being an active bystander is much easier said than done.

Before Alteristic trainers get into the three D’s, they focus on why people don’t speak out in the first place. Training starts by examining what human social behavior and thought patterns also conspire against us.

“A lot of us are taught how to mind our business, or that if it does not involve us then we shouldn’t interject,” Dr. Vance said. “We have to unlearn that particular method and relearn strategies to challenge our biases that we have developed over time.”

For people with privilege, losing that privilege can be a strong demotivator, Dr. Sue said. Many white Americans learn from an early age not to talk about race, which makes it harder for them to speak out.

“When a young child makes an obvious, naïve observation of skin tone, eyes and physical differences, what do parents do? They hush them up,” he said, adding that this can feed into adults’ claims of “color blindness,” which he explores in his book “Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence.”

“If you are colorblind, you are color mute,” he said.

The socialization of women, too, can also prevent them from being active bystanders, Dr. Edwards said.

Women learn “certain messages of what it means to be feminine and a woman,” she said, adding that the privilege of being white makes it “even easier for me to not make waves,” especially if not doing so helps retain that privilege.

And for people who hold marginalized identities, making waves can mean facing consequences, according to a recent article in Harvard Business Review. If you’re the only Black person at your company, for instance, calling out your boss’s inappropriate jokes may reduce opportunities for you.

When should I intervene?

Active bystanders should strive to intervene early and often.

What we need, Dr. Sue said, is for allies “to find the moral courage to intervene when they see a moral transgression occurring.”

“When no action is taken and people remain silent in the face of racism, it causes pain and suffering to the targets, it creates guilt in the mind of onlookers and it creates a false consensus that racism is OK,” he said in an email.

That suffering compounds the mental and emotional burden that marginalized people already carry, Ms. Pepe said. Continued exposure to systemic and casual discrimination increases stress and elevates cortisol, compromises mental health and can even lead to physical pain.

Almost by definition, an active bystander is a person who chooses to “act in the moment” when he or she witnesses problematic behavior, Dr. McElya said.

That said, there is no statute of limitations on stepping up. If you miss your window, follow up with the perpetrator later in a private conversation. Or share resources through email or social media.

“The way that you choose to say it is up to you,” Ms. Pepe said. “But at the end of the day, if your value is that people shouldn’t be hurt, for whatever the reason is, you can find a way to say that if you care about it enough.”

I try to do this but it’s so hard. I’m exhausted.

It is hard! The fatigue that we all feel is real and it is normal. Standing up as an active bystander, going to protests, engaging in online discussions, educating yourself and your children … all of that means exposing yourself to harsh realities like the killing of George Floyd, systemic discrimination and violence. And the deeper you get into these realities, the more you begin to see how entrenched they are.

“Those things are all very draining and all of us become traumatized,” said Beryl Domingo, an active bystander coordinator at Quabbin Mediation, a community-based organization in Orange, Ma., that offers dispute mediation services and active bystander training. “No one is unaffected by this. You’d have to be a robot not to be affected by these vicious incidents.”

The author Robin DiAngelo coined the term “white fragility” to describe what she calls the “silence, defensiveness, argumentation, certitude and other forms of pushback” that white people manifest when confronted with their own racial biases.

But, according to Ms. Domingo, building the “moral courage” to confront these feelings and become a more active bystander can help to make the world a more equitable place.

“It takes work and it takes time, but you do get better, actually,” she said. “Because you begin to feel confident, you begin to feel, Hey, I can do this.”

What if I get it wrong?

You will. Try again. Build resilience.

If you're uncomfortable and exhausted, it means you're headed in the right direction. Like anything worth doing, becoming an active bystander takes practice.

By building up "your moral courage muscle, you actually gain strength," Ms. Domingo said. "And other people see what you're doing, and they begin to do the same thing."

Keep in mind that, despite your best intentions and efforts, you won't always have the impact you desire. Pre-empt potential harm by leaning into the "bystander" part of being an active bystander, Dr. McElya said, and by taking your cues from marginalized people on how to show up for them.

You won't get it right every time. You might be unsure of how to intervene or miss your window for a snappy comeback. That's just reality, Ms. Edwards said, because in real life "we have barriers." Don't beat yourself up about it. Instead, plan to do better next time. Continue your education about the issues that matter, and remember that it's OK to start small.

Ms. Domingo said, "When you don't do something, the person doing the harm assumes that you're in agreement with their actions."

"If we don't challenge them, they will continue to do what they do and they will influence other people to do the same," she added.

More resources about being an active bystander:

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity website has a virtual training and downloadable materials.

Hollaback offers various trainings in New York City and a free guide to bystander interventions.

This Guide to Responding to Microaggressions explains identity-based microaggressions and ways to counteract them.

PHOTO: (PHOTOGRAPH BY Hélène Baum FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Load-Date: November 3, 2020
