RIVALSHOT ACADEMY · COURSE BOOK

Help Without Making It Worse

Bystander Choices — the companion book to the RivalShot Academy course

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Foreword: How to use this book

This book goes with the six-lesson RivalShot Academy course Help Without Making It Worse: Bystander Choices. The lessons give you the core ideas in a few minutes each. This book slows down, adds more examples, and gives you room to think.

It is written for anyone who spends time in public places: teens aged 16 and over, adults, volunteers at events and community spaces, and staff who work with the public. You do not need any background. You do not need to be brave, strong, confident or outgoing. Every choice in this book can be made by a person who is nervous, quiet, tired, new to the area or living with a disability.

The book is built on one idea. **When you see someone being harassed, pressured or put in danger in a public place, you have more options than "do nothing" or "confront the person causing it."** Most of the useful options are small, low-risk and ordinary. Asking a question. Telling the person at the desk. Standing a little closer. Checking in afterwards. This book helps you find those options, choose among them, and use them in a way that leaves the person being targeted in charge of their own situation.

A few ground rules shape everything that follows:

- **You are never required to confront anyone.** Leaving, asking staff and calling for help are always valid choices.
- **Your safety comes first.** A helper who gets hurt becomes a second person who needs help.
- **The targeted person decides.** Your offer is a door they may or may not open.

- **Describe behavior, never identity.** Nobody is suspicious because of how they look, where they seem to come from, their age, their disability or their clothing.
- **You do not diagnose.** You describe what you see and hear and let people with the right role decide what it means.
- **No medical procedures are taught here.** If someone is hurt, the guidance stays at: check that the scene is safe for you, call for help, and get certified hands-on training if you want to do more.
- **No legal conclusions are given here.** Laws vary. Check the official source for your jurisdiction.

Each chapter matches one lesson. Inside each chapter you will find the lesson's ideas developed further, two short fictional cases (**In practice**), a **Checklist** you can review before you head out, **Key terms**, three discussion questions (**Talk it through**) for a class, team meeting or kitchen table, and a **Journal prompt**. All people and places in the examples are invented.

Some of the material touches on harassment and hard moments. You may pause at any point. If a chapter brings up something difficult for you, it is fine to skip ahead, come back later, or talk with someone you trust. Chapter 6 includes official resources for support.

This is an educational reading course. Finishing this book or the course saves no completion record and does not give you a certification, qualification or license. What it can give you is a calm, practised set of choices that you have already thought through before you ever need them.

Chapter 1. Before you help, check your own footing

Why your safety comes first

Many people who see someone being hassled in public feel two things at once: a pull to do something and a jolt of uncertainty. Should I step in? Is it my business? What if I make it worse? Those feelings are normal, and they are not signs of weakness. They are signs that you care and that you understand the moment carries some risk.

This course starts with your own safety for a practical reason. A bystander who rushes in and gets hurt, or who draws an angry person's attention, can turn one problem into two. The federal emergency-preparedness tutorial Until Help Arrives, published on Ready.gov, puts the point simply: you can't help anyone if you get hurt yourself. The same material encourages bystanders to pause and use their senses before acting, and to decide whether they are safer where they are or somewhere else.

Checking your own safety is therefore not selfish. It is the first step of helping well. It is also the step that makes every other option in this book possible, because once you know where you stand, you can see what you can actually do from there.

The footing check: space, exits, helpers

The footing check is a short habit you can do in a few seconds. Say the three words to yourself as you look around.

Space. How close am I to what is happening? Would moving closer put me within arm's reach of someone who is angry? Is anything between me and them, such as a counter, a row of chairs, a car or a pillar? Distance is one of the simplest forms of safety, and many of the options in this book can be used from where you already are.

Exits. Where is my way out if attention turns toward me? In a café, that might be the front door or the path to the counter. In a parking garage, a marked pedestrian exit or a stairwell. On a bus, the front near the driver. You are not planning an escape so much as making sure you are not boxed in.

Helpers. Who nearby has a role here? Staff, security, a driver, a desk clerk, an event volunteer with a radio, a manager in the back. Is there a posted number, a help-call button or an information desk? Who else is around who might help, such as another customer or a passer-by? Helpers are the people who can do things you cannot, and Chapter 3 is all about bringing them in.

With practice, the footing check can become quick. It turns a rush of adrenaline into a short list of real options.

What stress does to your body

Your body may not cooperate perfectly in a tense moment. Many people notice tunnel vision, muffled sounds, a racing heart, shaky hands, a dry mouth or a feeling that time has slowed down or sped up. Some people freeze for a moment. Ready.gov's Until Help Arrives tutorial describes these as normal reactions to stress.

The same tutorial notes that talking through how you would respond in advance, with family, friends or coworkers, helps your brain find a plan faster when something happens. Your brain

searches for something familiar to anchor to. If the only thing it finds is a movie scene of someone heroically intervening, that is not much help. If it finds "space, exits, helpers" and a few sentences you have practised, you have something real to reach for.

So if you freeze, you have not failed. Breathe out slowly. Do the footing check. Then choose.

When it is an emergency

Sometimes the footing check gives a clear answer. Someone is being physically hurt. Someone has collapsed or is not responding. Someone is threatening violence. That is an emergency.

In an emergency, move to a safer spot and call your local emergency number (911 in the United States). If there are other people around, point to one specific person and give them one specific job: "You in the blue jacket, please call 911." When everyone assumes someone else has called, sometimes nobody does. Naming one person can help.

When you call, give the location first. Call-takers will ask where you are and what is happening, and Ready.gov's tutorial notes that details such as the floor you are on and nearby signs or landmarks help responders find you. It is fine not to know every answer. Give what you can and follow the call-taker's instructions.

You do not have to approach anyone to make that call count. And you do not have to be certain that a situation is "serious enough" before you call. Dispatchers would rather hear from you.

Your limits are part of the plan

Everyone's footing is different. A person who uses a wheelchair, a teen on their own, an older adult, someone who has been harassed before, someone who does not speak the local language well and someone who is exhausted after a long shift will each have different sensible limits. None of those limits is a failure. They are facts to plan around.

Teens deserve a special note. If you are under 18, bringing in a trusted adult, a staff member or emergency services is always a strong choice. You are not expected to handle adult conflict on your own, and nobody should ask you to.

Staff and volunteers have another layer: your workplace or organization may have its own process for incidents, with expectations about when you step in and when you step back. Learn it before you need it. Chapter 3 says more.

A useful exercise is to decide some limits ahead of time. For example: "I will not move closer to anyone who is shouting. I will always tell staff. I will call for help if anyone is touched or threatened." Limits like these make the moment simpler, because some decisions are already made.

What this does not mean

Checking your footing is not a test you must pass before you are allowed to care, and it is not an excuse to look away. It does not mean that only risky help "counts." It also does not mean you owe anyone a physical intervention. Stepping back, leaving, getting staff and calling for help are complete, legitimate choices. The point of the footing check is to find the help you can give safely, not to talk yourself out of helping.

In practice

The garage. Tomasz, a retired bus driver, hears shouting two rows over in a parking garage. A man is leaning into the open door of a small hatchback, yelling at the driver, who is gripping the wheel. Tomasz's instinct is to stride over. Instead he stops by a pillar thirty paces away. Space: he is far enough away to be out of reach. Exits: a marked pedestrian exit is right behind him. Helpers: there is a help-call box with a sign for garage security, and a couple loading groceries nearby. He presses the help-call button and says, "Level 2, near the elevators, a man is shouting at a driver in a small grey hatchback and leaning into the car." He stays by the elevator until a security officer arrives, then leaves. He never got closer, and he got the right person there within minutes.

The festival. Aaliyah, seventeen, is volunteering at the drinks tent at a summer street festival when an older visitor starts shouting at a younger volunteer about the price of lemonade, slapping the table with his palm. Aaliyah feels her heart pound and her hands shake. She remembers that this is normal, takes a breath and does a footing check. Space: she is behind the table, a few steps away. Exits: the back of the tent opens onto the volunteer area. Helpers: the tent supervisor is restocking ice twenty feet away. Aaliyah walks over and says, "There's a man shouting at Jonah about prices and hitting the table. Jonah looks like he wants him to go." The supervisor walks over. Aaliyah stays back. That was exactly the right job for her.

Checklist

- Pause for a few seconds before moving toward anything.

- Space: how close am I, and would moving closer put me within reach?
- Exits: where is my way out if attention turns toward me?
- Helpers: who has a role here, and is there a posted number or call point?
- If anyone is being hurt, has collapsed or is being threatened, move to safety and call your emergency number, or name one person to call.
- Give the location first when you call.
- Expect your body to react to stress; breathe and use the check anyway.
- Remember: leaving, getting staff and calling for help are always valid.

Key terms

- **Bystander:** anyone who sees or hears a situation they are not directly part of.
- **Footing check:** a quick look at space, exits and helpers before you decide how to help.
- **Person with a role:** someone whose job or position gives them authority or tools in a place, such as staff, security, a driver or a duty manager.
- **Emergency:** a situation where someone is being hurt, is in immediate danger or cannot respond. It calls for your local emergency number.
- **Stress reaction:** normal physical and mental effects of a tense moment, such as tunnel vision, a racing heart or freezing.

Talk it through

1. Think of a place you visit every week. Without naming any real person, where would you stand to do a footing check, and who has a role there?
2. Why might moving closer to a situation sometimes reduce your options rather than increase them?
3. How could a team at a workplace or event agree in advance on who calls for help, so nobody has to wonder in the moment?

Journal prompt

Write down three personal limits you want to hold in a tense public moment (for example, “I won’t move closer to someone shouting”), and one thing you will always be willing to do (for example, “I will always tell staff”). Then describe how it feels to have those decisions made ahead of time.

Chapter 2. Follow their lead: the targeted person decides

The expert in the situation is not you

When someone is being harassed, followed, cornered or embarrassed in public, the person on the receiving end knows things you don't. They know whether they have met the other person before. They know whether this is the first time or the tenth. They know whether talking back would calm things or make them far worse. They know where they are going next and what they need to get there safely.

That makes the targeted person the expert in the situation. Helping well means treating them as the decision-maker rather than as a problem to be solved. Your offer is a door they can open. It is not a rescue they must accept, and it is not your chance to take over.

This matters for safety as well as respect. A well-meaning stranger who insists on helping in a particular way can make a situation more dangerous for the person they are trying to help: by provoking the other person, by drawing attention the targeted person did not want, or by setting off consequences that the helper will not be around for.

Offer, wait, follow

The core technique of this chapter is three short steps.

Offer. Make one clear, low-pressure offer. Keep it short and specific: "Are you okay? Do you want me to stay?" "Want me to get someone from the desk?" "Would you like to sit over here?" If you can, say it so the person causing trouble cannot easily hear, by stepping alongside, lowering your voice or showing a typed message on your phone.

Wait. Give the person a moment to answer. In a tense moment, people often need a few seconds. A nod, a glance, a shake of the head or a quick "I'm fine" all count as answers. Do not fill the silence with more questions.

Follow. Do what they chose, even if you would have chosen differently. If they say yes, do the thing you offered and nothing bigger. If they say no, accept it.

Yes-or-no questions can be easier to answer than open ones in these moments. "What do you need?" asks a stressed person to come up with a plan on the spot. "Do you want me to stay?" asks for a nod.

Don't diagnose

Following their lead also means not deciding what is wrong with the targeted person or with the other person. In the moment, you do not know whether the two people are strangers, coworkers, neighbors or family. You do not know whether someone is drunk, ill, having a mental-health crisis, scared, grieving or simply furious.

Labels such as "she's in an abusive relationship," "he's obviously on something" or "that guy is crazy" feel like information, but they are guesses. Guesses steer help in the wrong direction. A person

having a medical emergency can look intoxicated. A person with a disability that affects speech or movement can be misread. A person who seems calm may be terrified and holding very still.

So stick to what you can see and hear. "He has followed her from the counter to the window." "She keeps saying no." "He hasn't answered when people speak to him." Those descriptions are useful to everyone. Leave the meaning to the person who is living it and to people whose role is to assess it.

Why people say no, and why that is not their fault

People decline help for many good reasons. They may want to end the situation as quickly and quietly as possible. They may not trust police or officials because of their own experience or their community's. They may worry that the other person will retaliate later, somewhere you won't be. They may feel embarrassed. They may simply not want strangers involved.

None of those reasons makes them responsible for what is happening to them. CDC's guidance on the public health approach to violence prevention states it plainly: victims are never responsible for the harm inflicted upon them. That principle should shape how you speak, in the moment and afterwards. Avoid questions with blame built in: "Why didn't you just move?" "Why are you even talking to him?" "Why were you out here alone?" Each of those puts the weight on the wrong person.

Saying no is not the end of your options

Respecting a no does not mean you have to vanish. In a public place, you can stay at a comfortable distance, within sight, so the person knows someone noticed and so that you can act if things

change. Keep your attention light. Glance up from your phone now and then rather than staring; hovering can feel like a second kind of pressure.

People also change their minds as things change. An answer of no two minutes ago is not a promise to refuse forever. If the person later catches your eye or moves toward you, offer again. Equally, a yes is not permission to take over. If someone says yes to "Do you want me to stay?", that is what they agreed to, not to you confronting the other person or calling the police.

When their lead and the situation pull apart

There are times when you should act even though the targeted person has not asked you to. If someone is being physically hurt, is being threatened with violence or cannot respond, call emergency services. That is not overriding their choice. It is responding to an emergency.

There is also a middle ground. Staff run the space you are in, and they have a right to know about harassment happening there. When you can, ask first: "Would it help if I let the staff know?" If the person says no, consider whether the behavior is affecting others or the space itself; telling a staff member that "someone has been bothering customers by the window" without speaking for any one person is often reasonable. Use judgement, and lean toward what the targeted person has told you.

Finally, following their lead never means doing something risky just because you were asked. If someone asks you to stand between them and an angry person, you can say, "I'm going to get staff right now," and do it.

What this does not mean

Following their lead does not mean standing by in an emergency, doing anything that puts you at risk because someone asked, or keeping staff in the dark about a problem in their space. It does not mean the targeted person must make perfect decisions, and it does not mean you are responsible for their choices. You are responsible only for offering well and following respectfully.

In practice

The train. On a crowded evening train, a man in a suit has been standing over a seated student for three stops, asking where she lives and whether she is alone tonight. Ifeoma, a nurse on her way home, catches the student's glance. She steps into the empty space beside her and asks quietly, "Hi, are you okay? Do you want me to stay here with you?" The student nods. Ifeoma stays and talks about the weather. The man drifts toward the doors. Two stops later Ifeoma asks, "Do you want me to get off at your stop with you, or are you fine from here?" The student says she is fine. Ifeoma does not argue, does not give a lecture to anyone, and does not ask the student to explain anything.

The bench. At a riverside park, Malik, a high-school senior, sees two adults on a bench arguing; one keeps grabbing the other's phone out of her hand. Malik does a footing check, then walks past at a comfortable distance and asks, "Excuse me, do you know which way the boat dock is?" The woman answers, and Malik adds, "Are you okay?" She says, "Yes, we're fine, thanks." Malik notices she does not look fine, but he respects her answer. He sits on a bench across the path where she can see him, texts his aunt to say where he is, and keeps an eye out. Ten minutes later

the couple walks off together, calmer. If he had seen her being hurt or heard her ask for help, he would have called for emergency help without hesitating.

Checklist

- Treat the targeted person as the decision-maker.
- Offer one clear, short yes-or-no choice.
- Wait for an answer, including a nod or a look.
- Follow what they choose, even if you would choose differently.
- Describe behavior; do not diagnose anyone's state, substances or relationships.
- Never ask questions that put blame on the targeted person.
- If they say no, you may stay at a comfortable distance in a public space.
- In an emergency, call for help even if no one asked.

Key terms

- **Targeted person:** the person being harassed, pressured, followed or threatened.
- **Offer, wait, follow:** a three-step way to give help without taking over.
- **Consent (in this course):** the targeted person's own choice about whether and how you help.
- **Diagnosing:** deciding what is "wrong" with someone (illness, substance, mental state, relationship) without the role or information to know.
- **Blame question:** a question that suggests the targeted person caused or could easily have prevented what happened.

Talk it through

1. Why might a person decline help even when they are clearly uncomfortable?
2. What is the difference between staying within sight and hovering? How could you tell which one you are doing?
3. When, if ever, would you tell staff about a situation after the targeted person said no? What would you say?

Journal prompt

Write the exact words you would use to offer help to someone being bothered, and the words you would use if they said, “No, I’m fine.” Then write one sentence about how you would feel accepting that no, and why accepting it is still a form of help.

Chapter 3. Bring in someone whose job it is

The most underrated move

When people imagine stepping in, they often picture themselves alone, facing down the person causing trouble. In real public places, a strong move is often different: bring in someone with a role. A café manager. A front-desk clerk. A security officer. A bus driver. A librarian. An event volunteer with a radio. A pool attendant.

People with a role usually have options you do not. They can ask someone to leave. They can move a person to a calmer spot that stays visible and near help, such as behind a counter. They can stop a vehicle, review a camera, lock a staff door, call for help with the right details, or refuse service. They also know the place: where the back exit is, who else is on shift, what has happened there before.

Bringing them in is not passing the buck. It is putting the problem in the hands of someone who can actually change the situation. For many bystanders, it is also the option that best fits their footing check: it moves you away from the tension and toward help.

If the role is yours

Many readers of this book are staff and volunteers. If you work with the public, the person with a role may be you.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) describes workplace violence as including threats, harassment and intimidation, not only physical harm, and it can involve customers, clients and visitors as well as coworkers. OSHA's overview notes that some work settings carry added risk, including work that involves the public and exchanging money. Its guidance points to prevention programs that include training workers on how to respond and making sure reports are taken seriously.

Practically, that means learning your own workplace's process before you need it:

- Who do you call or signal when a customer or visitor is harassing someone?
- Is there a phone extension, a radio channel, a button or a code phrase?
- When are you expected to step in, and when are you expected to step back and let a supervisor or security take over?
- Where is the safest place for a targeted customer or colleague to wait?
- How are incidents written up afterwards, and who reads them?

If you do not know the answers, ask your supervisor. Asking is a sign of a careful worker, not a worried one. A separate Front Desk Safety course is being drafted; it is not included in this public reading preview.

The three-part handoff: where, what, what they seem to want

When you bring someone in, they need a description they can act on quickly. Use three parts.

Where. Give a location someone else can find: "by the deep end," "third floor near the elevator," "the table by the front window," "the second carriage from the front." Use landmarks such as signs, floor numbers, entrances and counters.

What. Describe the behavior you saw and heard, in plain words. "He has followed her twice and blocked her way." "She's been shouting at the cashier and slammed her hand on the counter." "They took his phone and won't give it back."

What they seem to want. Say what the targeted person seems to be trying to do or has asked for. "She's trying to get back to the register." "He asked me to get someone." "They want to leave but the person is in the doorway."

This order matches how emergency call-takers work. Ready.gov's Until Help Arrives tutorial explains that call-takers ask where you are, what is happening and who is involved, and that details such as floor numbers and nearby signs help responders find you. The same structure helps a desk clerk or a duty manager move fast.

Describe behavior, not identity

Leave out guesses about mental state, substances, relationships or motives. And leave out anything about identity.

The Department of Homeland Security's public reporting guidance is direct on this point. It states that factors such as race, ethnicity, sex, national origin, religion or disability are not suspi-

cious, and it encourages people to report behavior and situations. That principle reaches well beyond the guidance's own topic. In any handoff, the reason for concern must be what someone is doing, not who they are or how they look.

A detail like a cap color or a jacket can help staff find the right person once the behavior is the reason for concern. It is a locator, not a reason. Compare:

- "There's a sketchy-looking guy by the window." (A judgement about appearance. Tells staff nothing about what is wrong.)
- "By the window, a man in a green jacket has sat down at a woman's table twice after she asked him to leave." (Behavior first. The jacket helps staff find him.)

The second description is fairer, more accurate and far more useful.

The same DHS guidance directs people to bring concerns to local law enforcement or a person of authority and to call 9-1-1 in an emergency. When there is no staff member nearby, or when someone is in danger, the emergency number is the right "someone whose job it is."

When no one with a role is around

Sometimes there is no desk and no staff. Then the next best thing is another bystander. Recruit one person with one task: "Can you stand with me while I check on her?" "Could you find the manager? I'll stay right here." "Can you call 911 while I watch where they go?"

Two calm people change the feel of a scene. They spread the load, they make it easier for the targeted person to feel supported, and they make it easier for everyone to step back if things get worse. If you are a teen, the person you recruit can be any trusted adult nearby or a staff member, and that is a strong choice.

What this does not mean

Bringing in help does not hand you the job of supervising what happens next, and it does not promise any outcome. Staff may handle things differently than you would have. You may never learn how it ended, and that is normal. It also does not mean reporting every awkward or unusual moment; save handoffs for behavior that is harming, threatening or frightening someone. And handing off is never a failure of nerve. In many public places, it is a practical, valuable thing a bystander can do.

In practice

The pool. On a busy Saturday at a community pool, an adult swimmer has been following a teenage lifeguard along the deck, criticizing him loudly and stepping into his path each time he tries to walk back to the office. Rosa, a parent waiting for her son's lesson to finish, sees the lifeguard glance toward the front desk. She walks to the desk and says, "By the deep end, a swimmer in a red cap has followed your lifeguard twice and blocked his way. He looks like he's trying to get back to the office." The attendant radios the pool manager, who walks out within a minute. Rosa goes back to her seat. She never spoke to the swimmer, and she did not need to.

The library. Tran, who works the evening shift at a branch library, sees a patron leaning over a study table and repeatedly telling a student to give up her seat, getting louder each time. Tran's branch has a clear process: he calls the supervisor's extension and uses the phrase the team agreed on for "I need a second staff member at my location." Then he walks over, stands beside the table at an easy distance and says to the student, "Hi, I've got a quieter table by the windows if you'd like it." The supervisor arrives and speaks with the patron. Afterwards, Tran writes up a short incident note with the time, location and what was said, using behavior only.

Checklist

- Look first for someone with a role: staff, security, a driver, a desk.
- If you are staff or a volunteer, know your workplace's process before you need it.
- Use the handoff: where, what, what they seem to want.
- Give landmarks: signs, floors, counters, entrances.
- Describe behavior; leave out guesses about mental state, substances, relationships or motives.
- Never offer race, ethnicity, sex, national origin, religion, disability, age or dress as a reason for concern.
- If no one with a role is nearby, recruit one bystander with one task.
- In an emergency, the emergency number is the right handoff.

Key terms

- **Handoff:** passing a situation to someone with a role, with a clear description.
- **Locator detail:** a neutral detail, such as a jacket color, that helps someone find the right person after behavior has been described.
- **Workplace violence (OSHA):** threats, harassment, intimidation and physical harm at work, including from customers and visitors.
- **Person of authority:** someone responsible for a place or service, such as a manager, security officer or transit operator.

Talk it through

1. Rewrite this description so it is useful and fair: “There’s a weird guy over there who’s probably drunk.”
2. Why is a locator detail acceptable while a judgement about appearance is not?
3. For staff: what would you want a customer to tell you if they saw a coworker being harassed?

Journal prompt

Invent a scene in a place you know (with no real people). Write a three-part handoff for it: where, what you saw and heard, and what the targeted person seems to want. Then underline every word that describes behavior and circle any word that is a guess or a judgement. Rewrite until nothing is circled.

Chapter 4. Change the moment without a confrontation

How momentum works

Harassment in public often depends on momentum. One person presses. The other person feels boxed in. Everyone else looks at their phones. The longer that pattern goes on, the more "normal" it starts to feel to everyone present, including the person doing it.

An ordinary interruption can break that momentum without anyone being challenged. Instead of turning toward the person causing trouble, you turn toward the person being targeted. You give them something normal to respond to. That small shift does three things: it shows the targeted person someone has noticed, it gives them a natural reason to move or stop engaging, and it quietly signals to the person causing trouble that others are present and paying attention.

The person causing the trouble does not need to be addressed at all. That is what makes this option low-risk.

Ordinary question, open door

The core technique has two parts.

The ordinary question. Ask the targeted person something neutral and true. "Do you know if this line is for pickup?" "Is this seat free?" "Do the dryers on this side take cards?" "Sorry, do you know what time the next train is?" The question does not have to be clever. It just has to be real and easy to answer.

The open door. Then offer a way out. “There’s a seat by me if you want it.” “I’m heading to the front desk, want to walk over?” “We could wait over by the window, the light’s better.” The door is an invitation, and the targeted person can walk through it or not.

Keep it honest. Invented stories, such as pretending to be their friend or announcing that their car is being towed, can fall apart if the other person asks a follow-up question, and then the targeted person is more exposed than before. True and simple is safer.

How you stand matters too. Speak to the targeted person, not to the one causing trouble. Keep your voice friendly and your body turned slightly sideways rather than squared up to anyone. You are joining a conversation about dryers, not stepping into a fight.

Other ways to change the moment

An interruption does not have to be a question.

- **Be present.** Stand or sit nearby without staring, so the person knows they are not alone.
- **Bring a second person.** Ask another bystander to come stand with you. Two calm people change the feel of a space.
- **Bring staff into view.** Ask staff to come over for an everyday reason, such as wiping a nearby table, restocking napkins or checking a delivery. A person with a role within sight can help settle things.
- **Use the setting.** Behind a café counter, a barista can call the targeted person up to collect an order, giving them a natural reason to move. On a bus, a seat near the driver can be offered.

Interruptions do not have to be spoken

If talking to a stranger is not comfortable or possible for you, you can still change the moment. Perhaps you use sign language, have a speech disability, are still learning the local language, or simply freeze up when you are nervous. Any of these options work quietly:

- Sit or stand nearby, within the targeted person's view.
- Catch their eye and nod toward the exit or the desk.
- Hold up your phone with a typed message: "Are you OK? Want me to get staff?"
- Walk to staff and point.

Quiet, visible support counts. Someone who has been harassed in public may long remember the person who simply came and stood next to them.

When an interruption does not work

Watch how the person causing trouble responds. If they turn their attention to you, raise their voice at you, or step closer, you have learned something useful: this situation needs someone with more authority. Disengage politely. Say something neutral like "Okay, I'll leave you to it," move toward staff or an exit, and bring in help.

You have not failed. You gave the targeted person a moment, and you found the limit of what a stranger can safely do. That information is valuable to the staff member or responder you bring in next.

The bigger picture

This approach fits within the wider picture of how communities prevent violence. CDC lists bystander approaches among the strategies that help shift social norms away from violence. The EEOC's report on workplace harassment describes bystander training as building awareness, a sense of shared responsibility, and the skills and confidence to act. An ordinary interruption is one possible option when your safety check supports it, not a method shown here to be safest. It can also make a situation worse. Leaving or getting staff remains valid, and these broad references do not establish the effectiveness of this course.

Fitting the interruption to the place

Every setting offers its own ordinary openings. Look for the ones that already belong there.

- **Café.** Ask whether a seat or an outlet is free, ask about the menu, or ask a barista to call the targeted person up to the counter. A staff member wiping the next table is a natural reason to bring someone with a role into view.
- **Transit.** Ask which stop is next or whether this is the right line. Offer a seat near the driver or the door. On a platform, moving to stand near the targeted person, closer to the help point, is a quiet open door.
- **Open house or community event.** Ask where the sign-in sheet is, where a session is being held, or whether they know when the next tour starts. Walking together toward the welcome table brings in a volunteer without anyone having to say why.

- **Visitor center or lobby.** Ask about a map, a schedule or the nearest restroom. Offering to walk toward the information desk turns a question into a handoff.

A good interruption is one that would make sense even if nothing were wrong. That is what keeps it calm, and it is what keeps the focus on the targeted person rather than on you.

What this does not mean

Changing the moment is not a trick to outsmart anyone, and it is not a confrontation in disguise. Do not lecture, insult, crowd, touch or physically step between people. It is not a substitute for emergency help; if someone is being hurt, call. And it is not an obligation. Some people, because of their own history, ability or comfort, will never choose an interruption, and bringing in staff instead is just as valuable. Stepping away from a dispute that turns toward you is a related topic of its own.

In practice

The laundromat. On a Sunday morning at a neighborhood laundromat, a woman has been standing too close to a young man folding clothes, telling him loudly that people like him don't belong in the neighborhood. He keeps folding, jaw tight. Sam, a retiree who walks with a cane, wheels her basket to the next table and asks him, "Sorry, do you know if the dryers on this side take cards? I can never remember." He answers. Sam keeps chatting about the machines and the price of detergent. The woman mutters something and walks out. Sam asks quietly, "You alright? I'm here until my load's done if you want company." He says thanks, and they fold in silence for a while. That was enough.

The hostel lounge. At a youth hostel's shared lounge, Noor notices one guest repeatedly sitting down beside another traveler, a young woman with a backpack and earbuds, and asking for her room number. The traveler keeps shifting away. Noor is not confident speaking English quickly, so she types on her phone, "Are you OK? I can go get the front desk," and turns it so only the traveler can see. The traveler nods and points toward the desk. Noor walks to the front desk, points to the lounge and says slowly, "That guest keeps asking her room number. She does not want it." The night clerk understands at once and walks over. Noor's interruption was silent, and it worked.

Checklist

- Turn toward the targeted person, not the person causing trouble.
- Ask an ordinary, true question.
- Offer an open door: a seat, a walk to the desk, a place to wait.
- Keep it honest; avoid invented stories.
- Stand slightly sideways with a friendly voice.
- Use quiet options if speaking is hard: presence, a nod, a typed message.
- If attention turns to you, disengage politely and bring in help.
- Never lecture, insult, touch or step between people.

Key terms

- **Momentum:** the way a harassing situation can feel normal and keep going when nobody interrupts it.
- **Ordinary interruption:** a neutral, true question or action that turns the moment toward the targeted person.

- **Open door:** an offer that gives the targeted person an easy way to move away.
- **Disengage:** to step back politely when an interruption is not working, then seek help.

Talk it through

1. Why do you think an ordinary question can work when a direct challenge might not?
2. What are the risks of an invented story, even a kind one?
3. Think of someone with limited mobility, limited speech or limited time. Which interruption options would work for them?

Journal prompt

Choose a setting you know well. Write two ordinary, true questions you could ask a targeted person there, and one open door you could offer. Then write what you would notice that would tell you to stop and get help instead.

Chapter 5. Recording and notes: only if safe, only for them

A powerful tool with sharp edges

Many people carry a camera. A recording made carefully can sometimes help a targeted person later, when they talk to an employer, a landlord, a school, a transit agency or police. It can show what was said and done when memories differ.

A camera can also make things worse. Pointing a phone at an angry person can escalate a tense moment and turn their anger toward you. Filming can turn the targeted person into content, sometimes for millions of strangers. And while you are framing a shot, you are not calling for help, offering a seat or getting staff.

Recording has risks. That does not make it wrong. It means it comes with conditions.

Three questions before you raise a phone

Is someone already helping, or is help on the way? If nobody has called for help or brought in staff, use your phone to call for help rather than film. Help first, record second, if at all.

Can I stay at a safe distance without escalating things? If recording could escalate the situation or make you lose track of your own exit, it changes your footing. Choose another option.

Do I know that recording is permitted in these circumstances? Rules about recording people, and especially about recording audio, differ from place to place. Some venues have their own policies. This book does not determine whether record-

ing is lawful or permitted at a particular location; check applicable official guidance ahead of time, as part of preparing, not in the middle of a tense moment.

If any answer is no, or you are unsure about permission or safety, do not record; put the phone away and choose another option from this book.

If you do record

- **Keep it steady and wide.** Shaky close-ups are hard to understand. A wider view shows what happened around the main moment.
- **Capture context.** A street sign, a shop name on a window, a station board, a clock on the wall. Quietly saying the date and time, if you can do so without drawing attention, helps too.
- **Focus on actions, not the targeted person's face.** Their face is the least necessary part of the record and the most harmful part if the clip ever spreads.
- **Don't narrate.** Commentary, insults or jokes make a recording less useful and can make you part of the conflict.
- **Don't follow anyone.** Following the person causing harm to keep filming puts you at risk and turns you into an investigator, which is not your job.
- **Stop if it raises the risk.** If recording starts to draw attention or anger, stop and step back.

If you are under 18, telling a trusted adult or a staff member what you saw is a strong choice, with or without a clip.

Respect their privacy

This is the most important part of the chapter. A recording of someone being harassed is about them. It is not yours to use for your own purposes, however good your intentions.

Afterwards, if it is safe and welcome, approach the targeted person: "I recorded some of that from over there. Would a copy be useful to you?" Some people will want it right away. Some will want time. Some will never want to see it. Each answer is valid.

Never post it online, share it in a group chat, or send it to a news outlet or a public social media account without their clear permission. A viral clip can expose a person's face, workplace or neighborhood to strangers. It can bring a fresh wave of harassment, this time online. It can also take away their choice about whether and how to report, and to whom.

Do not promise that you can delete or share a recording without first checking what applies; this book does not decide whether a recording must be retained or may be shared or deleted. If that is uncertain, seek appropriate official or qualified guidance and keep it out of public circulation. If they want a copy but would rather not swap contact details with a stranger, ask whether a staff member can help arrange a private handoff.

Notes: the quieter alternative

Written notes can do much of the same work with less risk. You can write them after the moment has passed, from a safe place, without anyone noticing.

Good notes, written as soon as you safely can, include:

- the date and time;

- the place, as specifically as you can (level, entrance, carriage, table);
- what was said, as close to word for word as you remember;
- what was done, in plain words;
- which way anyone went afterwards;
- who else was present or helped, by role ("the cashier," "a security officer").

Good notes follow the same rule as a good handoff: behavior, not identity. Write actions and words, not guesses about why someone did something or what kind of person they are. DHS reporting guidance asks for behavior and situations and states that characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sex, national origin, religion or disability are not suspicious.

Keep notes private. Offer them to the person they concern or to the staff member handling the situation.

Tell staff what you saw, even without a recording

Many venues already have cameras, logbooks or incident reports. You do not need your own footage for a record to exist. Telling a staff member, "I saw what happened at the pay station around ten past six, and I can describe it," lets the organization decide whether to keep its own records and how. A clear, behavior-only account from a calm witness is often more useful than a clip.

Keeping a recording you have not yet handed over

Sometimes you record and cannot find the targeted person afterwards, or they leave before you can ask. In that case, keep their privacy at the center. Do not share it with friends or post it "to find them." Keep it on your own device only, out of shared albums

or group backups. If staff were involved, you can tell them you have it and let them decide how the person can reach it. Do not assume you should delete it or keep it; this book does not decide whether a recording must be retained, so if that is uncertain, seek appropriate official or qualified guidance. A careful record kept private does no harm; a clip that spreads without consent can do a great deal.

What this does not mean

Taking notes or making a recording does not make you an investigator. This book asks no one to gather evidence, identify a person or follow anyone. It also supplies no legal conclusion about a particular person's reporting or preservation obligations. A recording is only one possible way to help; getting staff, calling for help and making a factual handoff are alternatives. Any later handling should respect privacy and applicable guidance, rather than assuming that consent alone settles every question. A separate digital-footprint course is being drafted and is not included in this public reading preview.

In practice

The pay station. At a parking-garage pay station, Kenji sees an attendant being sworn at and threatened by a driver who wants to leave without paying. Pulling out a phone to film feels likely to make the driver angrier, so Kenji steps back toward the elevator, calls the security number on the posted sign, and gives the level and the lane. Afterwards he types a few lines: the time, the level, what the driver said, what the driver did, the car's color and which way it went. When the attendant's supervisor arrives, Kenji

offers the notes and asks the attendant whether they want a copy. The attendant says the supervisor can keep them. Kenji posts nothing anywhere; he simply hands over what he saw.

The plaza. In a busy downtown plaza, Grace sees a commuter being shoved and shouted at by another person near the fountain. A security officer is already jogging over and someone else is on the phone with emergency services. Grace is about twenty meters away, behind a planter, nobody is looking her way, and she checked ahead of time that recording is permitted in this plaza. She records steadily for about forty seconds, keeping the fountain and a street sign in the frame and avoiding the commuter's face. When things are calm and the officer is with the commuter, Grace waits until the commuter is free and asks, "I filmed some of that. Would a copy be useful to you?" The commuter asks her to give it to the officer. Grace does, and asks the officer whether she should keep her own copy.

Checklist

- Before recording, ask: is help already coming?
- Can I stay at a safe distance without escalating things?
- Do I know that recording is permitted here? (This book gives no legal conclusion; check ahead of time. If unsure, do not record.)
- If recording: steady, wide, with context, not focused on the targeted person's face.
- Do not narrate, follow anyone or move closer to get a better shot.
- Afterwards, if safe and welcome, ask whether a private copy would help.

- Never post or share without their clear permission; do not promise deletion without checking what applies.
- Consider written notes instead: time, place, words, actions, direction.

Key terms

- **Documenting:** making a record of what happened, by video, audio or written notes.
- **Context shot:** part of a recording that shows where and when something happened.
- **Permission to share:** the targeted person's clear agreement before a recording goes anywhere beyond them.
- **Contemporaneous notes:** notes written soon after an event, while details are fresh.

Talk it through

1. Why might a recording that seems helpful to the public still harm the person in it?
2. What could make written notes more useful than a video in some situations?
3. How would you respond if a friend wanted to post a clip they took of a stranger being harassed?

Journal prompt

Write your personal recording rule: when you would not record, how you would check permission ahead of time, how you would ask whether a private copy would help, and what you would do instead if recording were unsafe or permission uncertain. Do not promise deletion or public sharing.

Chapter 6. After it ends: checking in and looking after yourself

The moment after the moment

When the tension passes, because the person causing trouble leaves, staff take over, or the train reaches the station, it can feel as if the story is over. For the person who was targeted, it often is not. Being harassed in public can leave someone shaken, embarrassed, angry or numb. The silence of onlookers can sting too.

That is why there is often one more useful thing a bystander can do: check in. A short, kind check-in tells the person that someone saw what happened and thought it was wrong. CDC counts supporting people who have been harmed, to lessen that harm, among its violence-prevention strategies. A check-in is a small, everyday version of that support, and it is available even to bystanders who did nothing else in the moment.

A three-part check-in

Acknowledge. "That wasn't okay. I'm sorry that happened." Naming it as wrong matters. It tells the person they are not overreacting.

Ask. "Are you alright? Is there anything you need right now?" Keep it simple and open.

Offer something small and specific. “Do you want me to wait with you until your ride comes?” “Want me to walk you to the desk?” “Would you like me to call someone for you?” “Can I get you some water?”

Then listen more than you talk. Accept whatever answer you get. Some people want company; others want to be left alone right away. Some will want to talk about it; others will change the subject. All of those are fine.

Match how the person communicates. If they are Deaf or hard of hearing, writing a note or typing on a phone may be easier. If you do not share a language, gestures and a translation app can carry a simple message. If they are a child or young teen, bring in staff or a trusted adult rather than handling it yourself.

What to avoid

A check-in can easily slide into questioning. Keep it from doing that.

- Do not ask why they did not respond differently.
- Do not tell them what they should do now.
- Do not press them to report it if they have not raised it.
- Do not ask for their contact details or offer to stay in touch unless they bring it up.
- Do not share your own strong opinions about the person who caused it; this is not about them.
- Do not minimize: “Don’t let it get to you” or “It could have been worse” can leave someone feeling unheard.

Sharing resources, gently

If the person seems to want resources, you can mention a few. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline can be reached by call or text when someone is struggling, and its guidance for helpers notes that you can contact 988 when you are worried about a friend. Emergency services are for immediate danger. Many venues and workplaces have their own reporting routes; staff can explain those.

Offer resources as information, not instructions. “If it’s useful, I know 988 is there for call or text if things feel heavy later” lands very differently from “You need to call someone.”

Looking after yourself

Then check in with yourself. Bystanders often feel shaky, replay the moment, sleep badly for a while, or second-guess what they did. Some feel guilty that they did not do more. Some feel angry long after.

The National Institute of Mental Health notes that it is natural to feel afraid during and after a frightening situation, that most people’s reactions ease over time, and that supportive friends and family and regular routines for meals, sleep and exercise help. It also notes that it is important to seek professional help if symptoms do not improve over time. The 988 Lifeline’s guidance for helpers makes a related point: take care of yourself when you are supporting someone through a difficult time.

Practical steps:

- Talk it over with someone you trust. Leave out details that could identify the people involved.

- Eat, drink some water, and give yourself a little time before the next demanding task.
- Notice if the moment keeps coming back and is not easing over time, or if it is affecting sleep, work or relationships. That is a signal to seek support from a health professional.
- If you are in crisis, call or text 988. In immediate danger, call your emergency number.

For staff and volunteers

Staff and volunteers have one extra step. Follow your organization's process for writing up what happened, while the details are fresh, using behavior rather than guesses. Tell a supervisor if the incident is affecting you. A well-run organization treats that as part of the work, not as a complaint. If your workplace offers an employee assistance program or peer support, this is exactly what it is for.

If you could not help in the moment

Sometimes you freeze, or the moment passes before you decide, or your footing check tells you to step away. Afterwards you may feel that you let someone down. That feeling is understandable, but it is not the whole story. Choosing not to move closer to danger was a valid choice. Stepping away was a valid choice.

It is also rarely too late to do something small. You can still check in once the situation has calmed. You can still tell staff what you saw. And you can use the experience to rehearse: what would you notice, say or do next time? That is one way to become a steadier bystander: not by getting everything right the first time, but by thinking it through kindly afterwards.

Looking back over the whole course

Across six lessons, you have practised a full set of bystander choices. You checked your footing. You followed the targeted person's lead. You brought in someone whose job it is, with a clear description of behavior. You changed the moment without a confrontation. You recorded only with care, if at all. And you closed with kindness, toward them and toward yourself. None of it required you to confront anyone.

What this does not mean

Checking in does not make you the person's counselor, protector or long-term witness, and it does not mean you did something wrong if they brush you off. It does not mean the story is yours to share; keep their identity and image out of social posts. And looking after yourself is not self-indulgence. A bystander who rests, talks it through and seeks support when needed is a bystander who will be ready to help again. What to do in the hours and days after a hard moment is a related topic worth exploring.

In practice

The open house. At a library's community open house, Priya, a volunteer at the welcome table, watches an attendee berate a Deaf visitor for "ignoring" him at the sign-in sheet, until another volunteer steps in and the man leaves. Afterwards, Priya writes a short note on her clipboard: "Are you okay? That wasn't your fault. Would you like a coffee, or a quiet room for a few minutes?" She holds it out. The visitor writes back, "Quiet room, thanks." Priya shows her to the reading room, then returns to her post and

tells the volunteer coordinator what happened so it can be written up. The check-in took two minutes and matched how the visitor communicates.

The ride home. Marcus, a warehouse worker in his fifties, sees a stranger yelling at a young mother with a stroller at a bus shelter until the bus arrives and the stranger walks off. On the bus, he catches her eye and says, "That wasn't okay. You alright?" She says, "Yeah. Thanks for asking." He nods and leaves it there. That night he cannot stop replaying it and wondering whether he should have said something sooner. He tells his brother about it over the phone, without describing the woman. Talking it through helps. A week later it has mostly faded. He makes a note to himself that if it had not, he would have talked to his doctor.

Checklist

- When it is over, consider a check-in if it is safe.
- Acknowledge: "That wasn't okay. I'm sorry that happened."
- Ask: "Are you alright? Do you need anything?"
- Offer one small, specific thing they can accept or decline.
- Avoid blame, pressure, minimizing and requests for contact details.
- Share resources gently, as information, not instructions.
- Afterwards, check in with yourself and talk it over with someone you trust.
- Seek professional support if reactions do not ease over time; call or text 988 in a crisis.

Key terms

- **Check-in:** a short, kind contact with the targeted person after a situation ends.
- **After-care:** support for the targeted person and for yourself in the hours and days after an incident.
- **Minimizing:** words that make a harmful moment sound smaller than it felt.
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** a U.S. call-and-text line for people who are struggling or worried about someone else.

Talk it through

1. Why might a check-in matter even if you did nothing else during the incident?
2. What is the difference between offering resources and telling someone what to do?
3. What helps you personally settle after a stressful moment, and who could you talk to?

Journal prompt

Write a short check-in you could say or write down after a tense moment, and one thing you would do for yourself afterwards. Describe the kind of person you could talk it over with (no names needed), and the signs that would tell you to seek more support.

Glossary

- **After-care:** support for the targeted person and for yourself in the hours and days after an incident.
- **Blame question:** a question that suggests the targeted person caused or could easily have prevented what happened.
- **Bystander:** anyone who sees or hears a situation they are not directly part of.
- **Check-in:** a short, kind contact with the targeted person after a situation ends: acknowledge, ask, offer.
- **Consent (in this course):** the targeted person's own choice about whether and how you help.
- **Context shot:** part of a recording that shows where and when something happened.
- **Diagnosing:** deciding what is "wrong" with someone without the role or information to know.
- **Disengage:** to step back politely when an interruption is not working, then seek help.
- **Documenting:** making a record of what happened, by video, audio or notes.
- **Emergency:** a situation in which someone is being hurt, is in immediate danger or cannot respond.
- **Footing check:** a quick look at space, exits and helpers before deciding how to help.
- **Handoff:** passing a situation to someone with a role, using where, what and what the person seems to want.

- **Locator detail:** a neutral detail, such as a jacket color, that helps someone find the right person after behavior has been described.
- **Momentum:** the way harassment can feel normal and continue when nobody interrupts.
- **Offer, wait, follow:** a three-step way to give help without taking over.
- **Open door:** an offer that gives the targeted person an easy way to move away.
- **Ordinary interruption:** a neutral, true question or action that turns the moment toward the targeted person.
- **Person with a role:** staff, security, a driver, a desk clerk or anyone whose position gives them authority or tools in a place.
- **Stress reaction:** normal physical and mental effects of a tense moment.
- **Targeted person:** the person being harassed, pressured, followed or threatened.

Where to go next

Finding qualified hands-on training

Reading builds a foundation. Practice with real people builds confidence. If you want to go further:

- **First aid and emergency skills.** Ready.gov's safety-skills page recommends taking a first aid and CPR course, and suggests contacting your local American Red Cross chapter for training information. This book teaches no medical procedures. Hands-on, certified instruction is the right place to learn them.
- **In-person bystander workshops.** Many community organizations, schools, colleges, unions and employers offer live bystander workshops. When you compare options, look for: instructors who explain their qualifications; practice through discussion or role-play rather than lectures alone; a clear statement that confrontation is never required; trauma-informed design that lets participants pause; and no stereotypes about who is "suspicious."
- **Workplace training.** If you are staff or a volunteer, ask your organization what incident-response training it offers and what its own process is. OSHA's workplace-violence overview describes training workers on how to respond as part of a prevention program.

Completing this course is not a certification, and no course can promise you will handle every situation well. Practice simply makes the next choice a little easier.

Official resources

- **Emergency:** your local emergency number (911 in the United States) when someone is being hurt, is in immediate danger or cannot respond.
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** call or text 988 if you or someone you are worried about is struggling.
- **NIMH, Coping With Traumatic Events:** information about common reactions after a frightening event and when to seek help.
- **OSHA, Workplace Violence:** background for staff and employers on harassment, threats and prevention programs.
- **DHS, If You See Something, Say Something:** reporting guidance that centers behavior, not identity, and directs concerns to local law enforcement or a person of authority.

Related topics

These are related topics, not courses included in this public reading preview.

- Noticing situations and checking assumptions before choosing a response
- Stepping out of a dispute that turns toward you
- The staff side of the counter
- The hours and days after an incident
- What happens to images and information once they are shared
- Planning ahead for your own routines

Sources

All sources below were opened and read on 2026-10-15. They support specific, limited statements in this book; no third-party lesson, framework, quiz, script or image was copied.

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