

# Understanding and Counteracting Bystander Apathy

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GSSC 1084: Psychology of Human  
Relations

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11 March 2022

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The bystander effect has been analysed and observed in great depth and largely stems from the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese in New York City; Kitty was returning home from working a bartending shift and was viciously attacked and ultimately killed as several of her neighbours watched on ([Ruhl, 2021](#)). This sparked a public interest in what was deemed the bystander effect, or bystander apathy, and has been studied and examined thoroughly ever since, in many different capacities. Understanding what causes individuals to behave in this manner – where they don't take action to give aid to another individual or group of individuals that need it – can help researchers and society alike to determine how best to be aware that the bystander effect may be taking place, and how to best combat it in order to avoid another devastating situation like that experienced by Ms. Genovese.

Observing the bystander effect as it happens and recognizing it for what it is grants on-lookers in high-stress situations the capacity to rationalize and decrease their own personal stress in order to understand the situation and combat the detrimental effects of bystander apathy, increasing the likeliness that aid will be given to those in need.

### Influences

#### Diffusion of Responsibility

Research done by Hostensius and de Gelder (2018) propose that the ultimate cause, or influence, of bystander apathy to be an uncertainty of one's own competence in comparison to that of the unknown competence of the other bystanders; their research shows that, "Bystander apathy is reduced when bystanders know each other, and an individual's competence relative to other bystanders influences the occurrence of helping behavior." ([Hostensius & de Gelder, 2018](#)). An example given includes the conditioning of individuals to allow the "fittest" or "most experienced" individuals to supply aid to those in need, such as seen in firefighters, police, or other emergency responders; we as a society are conditioned not to intervene out of fear that we may potentially make the situation worse.

This theory is also examined by professor of psychology Stephanie Preston, who references a study of the bystander effect on rats and how they react when strangers are introduced to a situation; when applied to humans, Preston notes, "When [there are] strangers, there's this added inhibition from acting... you don't have any knowledge about if they could be more helpful." ([BBC, n.d.](#)). This also references what is known as a diffusion of responsibility – this occurs when bystanders feel that someone else in the crowd bears more responsibility than they do, creating a perpetual system of un-helping due to the lack of familiarity between the bystanders ([Blagg, 2019](#)).

## **Moral Disengagement**

Another report published in *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal* in August 2021 based on a study of students in Grades 1, 2, and 3 focuses on the development of morality through varied degrees of family functioning (high/healthy vs. low/less healthy). Their findings reveal that strong, healthy familial connections and relationships also play a substantial role in how likely an individual is to “perform positive defending behavior” ([Deng et al., 2021](#)). The report examines how students that grew up in high-functioning families tend to have higher moral standards as opposed to students that grew up in lower-functioning families and are more likely to defend an act of bullying as a bystander. Using this information, it’s clear there is a correlation between how well a family functions and communicates and the development of children and adolescents’ morality and overall social behaviours; children from lower-functioning families are, “more likely to score higher on moral disengagement” ([Deng et al., 2021](#)). Moral disengagement is defined as, “the process where an individual or group of people distance themselves from the normal or usual ethical standards of behaviour...” ([Oxford Review, 2017](#)), and relates to the bystander effect in the sense that individuals that score higher on moral disengagement are at an increased likeliness of justifying negative behaviours, such as not helping another individual that is being bullied and then rationalizing their lack of action; Individuals that score lower in moral disengagement are actually more likely to intervene in a bullying-type situation, thereby decreasing the likeliness of bystander apathy in that specific individual ([Gini et al., 2020](#)).

### **Counteracting Bystander Apathy**

In order to prevent bystander apathy from occurring, it’s important to understand why it happens. As discussed, it’s noted that the bystander effect occurs mainly under high-stress situations with a group of individuals unfamiliar with one another. While it’s not possible to control who we are always with or where or when one of these incidents might occur, it’s vital to be aware that bystander apathy is likely to form in a situation where these factors come into play – being cognizant allows the individual to realize they might not be reacting in an effective way and actively work against it to bring aid to the individual(s) that needs it.

Working to educate society on the importance of effective communication and strong familial relationships to develop high-functioning families and its effect on decreasing overall moral disengagement can also help to create more individuals with tendencies toward defending behaviour ([Deng et al., 2021](#)). As noted in their research, these individuals are more likely to intervene and take charge in situations where another individual is deemed to need help in some capacity, effectively overcoming the initial paralyzing effect of bystander apathy. In situations where high-functioning familial connections are not present, Brüggemann et al., (2018) encourage teachers to focus on “eliciting and emphasizing the moral problem, or on emphasizing bystander responsibilities.” ([pg. 8](#)).

## **Conclusions**

Bystander apathy can have devastating effects; therefore, it is vital that steps be taken to ensure moral disengagement is at an overall minimum and that individuals recognize the need for help when it arises. Education on the effects of bystander apathy can help individuals in society to be aware of and look out for it; the bystander effect can only be counteracted if there is an awareness that it is taking place, so it is imperative that there is a general knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon.

Additionally, strengthening familial relationships and connections can increase the total number of individuals with low moral disengagement, increasing their likeliness of intervention in situations that are high in stress, low in responsiveness. Individuals that intervene in these situations are crucial, so increasing the overall number of individuals that are more likely to intervene creates less likeliness that the bystander effect will go unnoticed and increases the likeliness the individual that needs the help will receive it.

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