

If You See Something, Do Something

Have you witnessed hostile, intimidating, or threatening behavior? Bystanders have an important role to play in improving the learning and working conditions at the University. If you are able to do something, there can be many benefits from your actions. If you are a leader in your group, others may look to you for guidance on how to respond. You have a responsibility to ensure a positive environment for students and employees.

Toxic behavior can be very destructive and cause harm if allowed to continue unchecked. Active bystanders can participate directly and indirectly to address this problem. Consult the resource on [Toxic Behavior](#).

Resources

Office for Conflict Resolution

www.ocr.umn.edu
612.624.1030, 662 Heller Hall
Contact: Tamar Gronvall

Boynton Mental Health

www.boynton.umn.edu
612.624.1444, 410 Church St SE
Contact: Matt Hanson

Student Conflict Resolution Center

www.sos.umn.edu
612.626.0689, 254 Appleby Hall
Contact: Jan Morse

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When you observe shouting, belittling, or threatening conversations on campus, please consider taking action. Ask yourself:

- What is my role?
- What do I hope to accomplish?
- How can I take action without making matters worse?
- Who can I trust to advise or help me with this situation?
- Who is in a good position to help me address this problem?

Direct Intervention

If I observe a conversation that includes shouting, belittling, or threatening comments, what can I do? You might try ignoring the argument, and joining the conversation. Try to shift the focus to a neutral topic, distract the parties, and diffuse the situation by saying something like:

- Are either of you planning on going to the seminar this afternoon?
- Have either of you seen _____?
I've been looking for them all morning.



Or you may choose to acknowledge that you have overheard the conversation by reflecting back to the parties:

- I see that you are having a discussion...
- Excuse me if I am interrupting a private conversation, I overheard...
- What I just heard makes me feel uncomfortable...

These statements may alert the parties to your presence in a non-threatening way. Depending on the response, you may wish to add:

- I was just going to grab a coffee, would either of you like to join me?
- Is there anything I can do to be helpful?

In extreme cases, the discussion may escalate to a level where you (as a bystander) are uncomfortable and believe someone's safety is at risk. In these cases, you may inform the parties you are uncomfortable with what is happening. You are leaving to get immediate help and you will return shortly.

Indirect Intervention

Afterwards, you may wish to talk with one or both of the parties. Some of the issues you may focus on are:

- Here is what I observed
- Here is how it made me feel
- How can we work together to address this problem?

These examples may help you being a conversation with one of the people in the argument you witnessed:

- I came into the room when you were talking with _____, and the conversation made me feel pretty uncomfortable.
- How did you feel about that?
- What are some resources and options for us in trying to address the problem??
- Are you interested in taking some action to address these concerns?

Another strategy is to talk with trusted colleagues who may have observed the behavior. Ask about possible resources and options. See the [Quick Reference Guide](#) for guidance on how to handle reports of toxic behavior.