

# New research highlights the importance of bystander intervention when tackling anti-social behavior

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Credit: Keira Burton from Pexels

Witnesses to anti-social behavior must speak up to support the lone voices of people who confront it to reduce the risk of such behavior

becoming tolerated in society, according to research from the Universities of Bath, Groningen and Western Australia.

"The sound of silence: The importance of bystander support for confronters in the prevention of norm erosion" is published in the [\*British Journal of Social Psychology\*](#).

Three studies into the impact of bystander conduct showed that when bystanders step in to support someone who is calling out mistreatment or harmful [behavior](#) it sends a strong message to onlookers that this behavior is unacceptable, helping to prevent a gradual erosion of social norms.

Conversely, staying silent, or changing the subject to avoid awkwardness, can be interpreted by others as a lack of agreement and undermines the efforts of the confronter.

The research shows bystander actions are pivotal in helping or hindering efforts to address [anti-social behavior](#).

"If something anti-social happens we look to someone to step in and say something," says lead researcher Anna Tirion. "It's tempting to think 'someone else has got this' and we don't need to get involved, but what we've been ignoring is that the initial confrontation is not the end of the interaction. If other bystanders stay out of it, it's not without consequences.

"If no one says anything to support the confrontation, people start to think the norm wasn't that strong. It chips away at pro-social norms that protect being kind and helpful to others, and not causing harm. Over time people start to think a particular (antisocial) behavior doesn't matter," said Tirion.

The researchers hope that the findings will make a positive contribution to bystander training. They hope that future studies will also look at the role of bystanders in whistleblowing scenarios and other contexts, such as when the people involved are all strangers.

The research was conducted during Tirion's undergraduate psychology studies at Bath, on a placement year at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

The studies investigated the effect of bystander responses to social confrontation in the context of COVID-19 social distancing rules, which were in place in most European countries in 2020–2021.

Participants were shown various scenarios where someone confronted a social distancing rule-breaker (admitting to hosting/ attending parties during lockdown) to investigate the effect of different [bystander](#) reactions (support, silence, or changing the subject) on how strong participants found the norm of following the rules.

The researchers also measured to what extent the participants thought the bystanders agreed with the confronter based on their reaction. When the confronter was left without support, participants concluded that the bystanders did not strongly agree, leading them to think the norm to socially distance was weak.

Despite the specific COVID context the researchers say that understanding the mechanisms of this behavior makes it widely applicable to social confrontations in the workplace, on [public transport](#), and in society at large.

"How bystanders can lend their support depends a bit on the situation," said Tirion. "If your face is visible to everyone, like on the Zoom call we simulated in one of our studies, simply nodding might be enough to send

that supportive signal. Otherwise, a verbal expression of support like 'Yeah, you're/they're right' should do it.

"If you're physically some distance away from the confrontation, you might want to go stand next to the confronter before you say something so your whole body language expresses that [support](#)—if you feel safe to do so."

Co-author Dr. Annayah Prosser, from the University of Bath's School of Management, said, "There is a personal cost for people to go against the norm, to cause tension and friction. Even if people find someone's behavior unacceptable there is a social norm against speaking up. Causing friction is uncomfortable and this can hold people back."

People may also be reluctant to step in for fear of overkill, but the researchers say this is far from the current reality. "People's intuitive response can be that it will be a 'pile-on' but this is not a problem currently," said Dr. Prosser. "People are taking a lot of social risk to intervene and going unsupported. We need to make sure intervention against anti-social behavior is supported by bystanders, and not just met with silence."

**More information:** Anna S. C. Tirion et al, The sound of silence: The importance of bystander support for confronters in the prevention of norm erosion, *British Journal of Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12709](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12709)

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