

This page describes how encouraging better “bystander” behavior can help prevent partner abuse

First, how does the Army think the term bystander can be used?

By definition, everyone in the Army community is a bystander to the threat of domestic abuse, this includes Soldiers at all levels of command and civilians. The concept and the role of the bystander are quite simple. The bystander sends a powerful message to both the victim and perpetrator by what he or she does. The bystander may be an unwitting actor in the events that unfold, but their behavior can be very important in either validating the perpetrator and the abusive behavior or rejecting both as unacceptable.

Army research conducted by Cornell University (Appendix 4) indicates Soldiers and Family Members are very aware many relationships may be in trouble because they reported on how important the marriage relationship classes, anger management classes and the *Strong Bonds* chaplain retreat programs are in helping couples reestablish their relationships and build skills to help sustain them. These classes and retreats were repeatedly mentioned as high value resources.

Better “Bystander” behaviors by Soldiers and Family members might be encouraged in the following ways:

The majority of Soldiers and Family Members are not involved in interpersonal violence or domestic abuse, but are members of a community that may experience these incidents and are certainly aware that interpersonal violence can exist in relationships.

Traditionally the Army emphasizes how one person can make a difference (i.e. leadership training, the Soldier’s Creed, I.A.M. Strong, Army Strong).

Prevention programs using a bystander approach stress how the bystander usually does a better job of reacting to these situations if he or she has thought about them previously, or better yet, discussed similar situations with others and knows how other people would react. It is also important the bystander act within his/her ability to take constructive action.

Social norm theory suggests bystanders can have a powerful impact on others by modeling positive or negative behavior through action or inaction, language, and attitude (Miller & McFarland, 1991). Research on the impact of the bystander in situations of bullying behavior, harassment and assault suggest that sometimes one strong individual who commands the respect of the group by their status or knowledge or presence can sway opinion and behavior.

Mobilize the vast majority of non-abusive bystanders in the Army community to actively participate in prevention and intervention at an early stage in interpersonal violence of all kinds and to avoid the “do nothing” option thereby unleashing a powerful prevention tool for a whole range of negative outcomes: drunk driving (Never let a friend drive drunk), suicide (Never leave a Fallen Comrade), illegal drug abuse (Just Say No), interpersonal violence (Not in My House).

Highlight the importance of paying attention to very early intervention in relationships as a way of preventing domestic abuse. Teach teens about dating violence; emphasize effective communication skills, help those who have come from Families with a history of domestic abuse learn new ways to interact with their spouse and support couples at all stages of their relationship to build the resiliency to whatever challenges they face in military life and that there are choices. Marriage, like parenting, does not come with a guidebook, but individuals, couples and Families can learn new skills and develop healthy ways of interacting.