

A Practical Web Tutorial to Bystander Intervention and De-escalation Tactics

<https://watt.cashmusic.org/writing/deescalation>

We're already seeing it: the uptick in harassment, intimidation and violence based on bigotry spurred by Trump's election, mirroring the very same phenomenon in the UK during and after Brexit. As a marginalized American—intersex, queer—whose fear of public violence has gotten worse personally and who fears for many of their friends' lives as well right now, and as a musician, I'm writing this guide today that centers on the kinds of public spaces that we musicians often find ourselves in but is certainly not exclusive to those spaces. I believe that we have a deep responsibility to care for one another and for the people who come to see us play, and that though any kind of independent musical community is immensely fractured, some of those fractures can be healed by everyday thoughtfulness. (Some of them are obviously systemic, too.)

In case you're wondering what qualifies me in particular to write this guide: I was trained in bystander intervention and de-escalation tactics by a social worker brought in by a community group I was working with during A16, the Washington, DC IMF/World Bank protests in 2000 that complemented the WTO actions in Seattle. I immediately saw parallels to other aspects of my life—the survival techniques I'd developed to get through the violence in my childhood and teen years, the therapeutic techniques I was learning to counter the PTSD resulting from that violence, and the techniques I'd learned as a volunteer at domestic violence shelters and with street harm reduction programs to keep things from getting worse for people already often in tenuous situations. I have used these techniques hundreds of times—at street protests, with violent ex-husbands and ex-boyfriends as a court escort and as a friend, in public situations with strangers on the train. I have seen them work upwards of 90% of the time. I am a tiny, effeminate, odd-looking creature. If someone who reads as Not Normal and Not Threatening as myself can employ these techniques to great effect, surely they'll help you too.

THE BASICS

Be alert. We all walk around in public staring at our phones these days, our headphones in. Even as a street-smart person who's lived in urban areas my entire life and is forever on high alert for potential trouble, I allow myself to get distracted sometimes. Right now it's absolutely key that we be mindful of our surroundings and tuned into what's happening around us. We can't react in time or even assess a situation properly without constantly being aware of what's going on around us. Turn your headphones down so that you can hear the audio cues in your environment. If you're using your phone, lift your head every few seconds to scan what's going on around you.

Be attuned to body language and how it changes. Scanning the area every few seconds will allow you to suss what's baseline normal body language even for strangers, and will enable you to get a better read on whether things are potentially violent or if people are playing around.

Trust your gut. Survival skills are pretty intense, and most of us have the ability to read situations we've never even seen before thanks to our reptile brains. If your adrenal system (responsible for the physical manifestation of your fight-or-flight reflex—racing heart and pulse, dilated pupils, muscle readiness) is yelling at you based on something you've perceived, there's probably something wrong in your environment.

Act confident, and try to react with your head, not your heart. Even if you're shaking inside, even if you're sweating—responding to a stressful situation is scary, especially if it's not something that's regular for you—keep your chin lifted, your spine straight, your eyes clear, and your voice as calm and firm as possible. Maintain direct eye contact, but without malice. If you have to imagine yourself playing a role—think of the most confident, graceful person you know, fictional or non—do it. That helps me sometimes. If you approach an aggressor head down, voice quiet, they will be able to read that and will respond poorly. If you come up assertive (but not mutually aggressive), confident, and as calm as you can, that's the first step toward defusing a situation. Practice saying “No,” calmly and firmly, alone, to a mirror in your house, or to a helpful friend (you can practice together). Staying centered and calm, focusing on your intake and exhalation of breath for five counts if you feel yourself getting too emotionally carried away, will help you act rather than react.

Take a self-defense class. It'll help with confidence, posture, and feeling like you can enter a scary situation prepared for anything, if nothing else.

Don't white-knight. If there's a situation that you perceive to be harassment going on, reacting directly to an unknown aggressor in a mutually aggressive manner as an entrance move is going to startle them and could potentially make things worse. For example: I cannot count the number of times I've walked up to someone who looked like they were in trouble in a club, or at a train station, and pretended cheerfully that I knew them. "Hey! It's so good to see you! How are you doing?" If the person needed my help, they'd be able to respond in kind, and I could say "Excuse me, I haven't seen my friend in a while here," to the aggressor, and we could walk off together. That works far more often than you'd think it would. If the person didn't need my help, they'd be able to stare at me blankly, and I could say, "Sorry, thought you were someone else. Excuse me for interrupting!" and walk off.

There are all kinds of different situations, and all kinds of different situations call for all kinds of different solutions. There's no one-size-fits-all script here. Say you're friends with a man who starts catcalling a woman from a car you're both in, driving alongside her and expecting you to join in. Engaging with the woman wouldn't help anything. Instead, the best strategy is to engage with your friend, letting them know that this isn't behavior you approve of and asking him to leave the woman alone. This is a very different situation than the stranger harassment situation described above. Based on your position, the relationships of all of the people involved, including you, and the power dynamics involved, your strategy will change. At the end of this tutorial, I'll provide a link to all kinds of different resources and toolkits, helpfully aggregated by a collective of excellent people. The basic four strategies come down to *Direct* (respond directly to the aggressor, as in the street harassment example in this paragraph; this works best when you're working from a known and trusted position, and it does not generally work well when drugs or alcohol are involved), *Distract* (as in the stranger harassment club/train platform example above—distracting either person in the situation, really), *Delegate* (bringing in another person or people to help get a person in trouble to safety, pulling one party to one side and the other to another and thus defusing the situation), and *Delay* (use a distraction technique—whether it be in-person or via text/another messaging service—to pull a person who appears to be in trouble to the side to ask if they're ok and they need any other assistance from you). You'll mix and match and alter these strategies as necessary.

Differing De-Escalation Strategies

One proven de-escalation strategy is intuitive: the calm, direct, confident, assertive-but-not-aggressive style of engagement I referenced in the last section. This works best for situations in the beginning stages, where emotions haven't been stirred up too much and things are still relatively under control. Another is perhaps counterintuitive. If the aggressor appears to be on the verge of losing control, approach calmly, but respond to them initially with the same intensity and volume as they're using. Then, slowly step it back, lowering your volume and intensity with each response. We unconsciously mirror one another in social interactions, so this can help get someone down from a precipice slowly but surely.

Assertive ignoring—maintaining your space, calm and confidence while also refusing to engage further—can also help defuse certain situations (this is my personal go-to for street harassment of varying sorts). Shifting perspectives through your choice of conversational framing can also help—putting the focus on the aggressor's behavior as unacceptable rather than their entire person, using "me" statements rather than "you" statements ("This behavior makes me feel ..." rather than "You're doing this"), and/or forced teaming, a negotiation strategy where you constitute yourself and the aggressor as being on the same side and the action you'd like them to take (like leaving someone else alone) being in both of your self-interests.

Sometimes, one can be forced to play along with an uncomfortable or unacceptable situation just long enough so that we can escape it (we've all met that guy at the bar who seems like he'd get violent if we ignored his advances, right? So we smile politely until we can, say, get into the bathroom so that he'll stop following us around). This does not mean that you've chosen to capitulate or that the situation is your fault. It's just a survival strategy. I pretended that I was still asleep during a sexual assault once; pretending I was unconscious helped me escape further violence. It doesn't mean that that assault was my fault. It meant that I assessed the situation accurately and did what I needed to do to get through a horrible situation in a way that wouldn't make it worse.

The Power of Monitoring

In a lot of situations, when you notice something is wrong, just sticking around and serving as a witness can keep something worse from happening. One show we played, I remember watching a man follow around a woman from the headlining band all night with increasing worry. Not wanting to step in and potentially inflame a situation, I just sort of posted myself up in situations where I could watch him, like hanging outside with my partner while they were loading their van up because we noticed that guy was still skulking around. He saw we were there and eventually left. Sometimes, people will seize advantage of others' inattention or lack of presence to strike. We wanted him to know that we were watching and that we wouldn't let him get away with whatever he was planning.

This is particularly crucial for white people in regards to police misconduct and harassment. If you observe a police officer harassing someone in regards to immigration status or anything else, maintaining vigilant and safe witness can be absolutely crucial to preventing the situation from getting worse. It won't always prevent police brutality, but it can help. [WITNESS](#) has resources for safely documenting potentially violent policing situations and other abuses of institutional power at protests and in everyday life. [Here is an excellent tutorial](#) from Muna Mire at The Nation on how to copwatch and knowing your rights. Remember, when you're dealing with potential violence against marginalized people, though you might have the impulse to go to authority for resolution, the state's intervention could make things worse in about 100 different ways for about 100 different reasons.

De-escalation on the Internet

Goodness knows that in these tense times we may find ourselves arguing with all sorts of people via social media. Whether it's a conversation about position, strategy, facts, perspective, or personal safety, things can get ugly very fast because we have the ability to instantly respond to one another without reading visual and auditory cues (and thus also seeing one another, potentially, as flesh and blood). Tone can be harder to read. I try to operate by sort of a good-faith principle: if someone comes to me asking a question without calling me a name, even if that question is kind of insulting, I will often respond to it fairly calmly and firmly. If there's a slur involved and the person clearly just wants to provoke and not actually engage, I ignore it and block the person. I just don't have enough energy to bother. If a conversation gets heated, I will let the person know they've crossed a line and either just walk away from the conversation (if I know them and can trust them to respond to me fairly later) or walk away and block (if the person doesn't respond well or the conversation is clearly futile at that point). There's no reason that you have to start or even continue engaging with someone who's just going to cause you pain. Some people can be reasoned with; others refuse to listen. Whether or not they're listening to reason may change as the conversation goes on. It's important to know when to let go and cut your losses.

If you're trying to engage with a jerk to get them to leave a friend of yours alone, or you see something messed up go down on a friend's page or on their Twitter timeline, untag your friend when responding if possible. Continuing to tag them in an argument that might be extra stressful for them isn't helpful at all.

Don't bring other people into your fights by tagging them, either. Sometimes, because I am a known person who has been public about sexual assault, some random person will tag me in their fight presumably so I can come help them out. This is a massively inappropriate thing to do.

As with in-person interactions, responding with shame and blame, telling another person that they're Bad and that here's the Correct Way to Think, is generally not a response that will ever bear fruit. Changing another person's perspective is a subtle negotiation; if that's why you're truly engaging with them, it'll be a much more complex interaction. This doesn't mean you have to be "nice" or give up your principles, it just means knowing what tone and angle to use.

The Big Book of Resources, and Beyond

[Here](#) are all of the de-escalation and intervention resources collected by that fantastic group of people I mentioned prior. There are tons of different toolkits for tons of different situations here. Spend time with this, and share it with people, and if you happen to have additional resources to contribute, please do! There is a contact and submission form right on the page. At some point, this site will host a list of people like myself who do bystander intervention and de-escalation training workshops in person. If you'd like me to do a workshop for you, I can currently only work for free in Chicago (where I'm based) or NYC (where I am frequently), but I'm happy to do them, and I've started

doing them in tandem with other musicians from the stage in between bands. If you're an artist who would like me to do such a training or table with materials at your show, please let me know. I am easily Google-able. Rachel Sarah Levy, who also does such trainings in NYC for free/sliding scale or elsewhere for a contracted rate, was an invaluable resource in putting this tutorial together, and I am thankful we are working together. 17 Nov

Former article taken from a link in the article in the NYT 11/23/16

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/opinion/how-to-help-if-someone-is-being-harassed.html?ref=opinion&r=0>

[The Opinion Pages](#) [TAKING NOTE](#) NOV. 23, 2016

How to Help if Someone Is Being Harassed

Anna North

What would you do if you saw someone [yelling at a woman](#) on a bus, telling her to take off her hijab? If you saw someone [attack an African-American man](#) and tell him Donald Trump could deport him? If you saw a man [throw a woman off the sidewalk](#) as she walked her dogs?

As incidents of [racist, sexist and Islamophobic harassment](#) continue in the wake of Donald Trump's election, many Americans will have to ask themselves these questions. And while every situation is different, the tips below — adapted from materials produced by the anti-street-harassment group Hollaback! and other organizations — may help people respond if they see someone being harassed.

Don't assume you have to confront the harasser.

Directly confronting someone can be risky, because you can become a target, too. In many situations, another option is to talk to the person being harassed. You can ask if he or she needs help, or take a more indirect route by asking for the time or directions or starting a conversation about something other than the harassment. The artist Marie-Shirine Yener explains this tactic in [a helpful comic](#).

Taking the focus off of the harasser can make him or her retreat. In addition, approaching the person being harassed gives that person control over the situation — he or she can choose to accept or decline your help or ask you to do something specific. If you don't talk to the person experiencing harassment, you may not know what, if anything, he or she needs from you.

Ask someone else for help.

If you don't feel safe intervening yourself, you can ask someone else to step in. That could be a law enforcement officer. But it could also be a bus driver, train conductor, teacher or other authority figure, or simply another bystander.

If you can't intervene during the incident, you can still help afterward.

Maybe you saw someone call a fellow subway passenger a derogatory name, then walk away. You can still approach the passenger and ask if she needs help. She might want someone to go with her to her destination or to help her report the incident to law enforcement or an anti-harassment group. Just hearing that someone else saw and recognized the harassment can be helpful for some people.

Learn more.

Hollaback! is offering [online bystander intervention training](#) on Nov. 29 and Dec. 1. The group, working with other organizations, has also posted [some basic tips](#) on the #MomentofTruth Tumblr. A [web tutorial](#) on bystander intervention and de-escalation, by the writer Jes Skolnik, also includes links to other resources. [Men Can Stop Rape](#) offers training for boys and men on bystander intervention and other violence prevention strategies. Information about how to intervene can help you do so safely and confidently if the need arises.

Bystander Intervention

At a time like this, where people feel even more emboldened to attack others, support from those who are around is even more necessary. In addition to your personal experiences, we want to hear if you've intervened or if you've witnessed others speaking up against acts of hate and violence. In giving voice to our pain we can also acknowledge when acts of hatred are accompanied by moments of hope. Read some here and submit your own via the page using the tags HOPE and BYSTANDER INTERVENTION.

There are four strategies you can use. We call them the 4 D's of Bystander Intervention: **D**irect, **D**istract, **D**elegate, **D**elay. Here they are:

The 1st D is Direct Intervention. When you see someone being targeted you can confront the harasser and let them know that what they are doing is wrong. This can be risky and is not always the safest bet for everyone in the case that the harassment is re-directed at you, but there are some people who can do this.

The 2nd D is Distract. This is an indirect intervention. If you see someone being targeted, go up to them and ask for the time or for directions, pretending you're lost. There are many ways to create a distraction in a situation like this that will help de-escalate the potential for further harassment or violence.

The 3rd D is Delegate. If you see it happening, depending on where you are, you can ask for a third party to help, it can be another person (power in numbers), a transit employee, a teacher, a manager, etc.

The 4th D is Delay. If you see someone targeted with verbal harassment or something similar, after it happens, asking them if they are okay is powerful. There are so many forms of harassment, like verbal, non-verbal gestures, leering/staring someone down, that happen in passing. People may notice but may not feel like they are able to do anything in the moment, but asking the person being targeted if they are okay makes people feel less alone and can reduce trauma. In this climate, this is needed more than ever.

In addition, there is great comic by artist Marie-Shirine Yener on what to do if you [witness Islamophobic harassment](#). If you know other resources, send them to us at HOLLA at IHOLLABACK dot ORG and we'll add them.

<http://momentoftruth2016.tumblr.com/bystander>
(original)

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- This can be risky and is not always the safest bet for everyone in the case that the harassment is re-directed at you, but there are some people who can do this.

2. Distract.

This is an indirect intervention. If you see someone being targeted,

- go up to them (the person being harassed) and
- ask for the time or for directions, pretending you're lost.
- There are many ways to create a distraction in a situation like this that will help de-escalate the potential for further harassment or violence.

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(modified)

Love,
Pat