



Wing Commanders' Series
Additional Resource Document to the
Wing Commanders' Guide to Sexual Assault Prevention & Response

A Broader Understanding of Bystander Intervention

Research clearly indicates that there are far more individuals within the Air Force who are not committing sexual violence than those who are. Based on this reality, the key question that must be addressed is: If there are so many who are not committing sexual violence and are opposed to it, then how are current rates being sustained? The obvious answer lies in the fact that though few are committing the violence, there are even fewer acting to prevent it. A key to successful prevention is to understand and address this wide-spread bystander inaction.

Often, there is a pathological conceptualization of bystander inaction – such as apathy, indifference, character deficiencies or selfishness. The implication that bystanders who don't act simply don't care does not hold true most of the time, and may prove destructive when trying to mobilize them. Taking an alternate approach based on the premise that most Airmen and community members are decent and do not want their fellow Airmen to experience sexual violence, allows for a more productive strategy for Commanders.

In order to maximize those who will actively engage as bystanders, consider using the following guiding principles.

1. **Most civilian and Air Force members of your Wing are potential allies in prevention efforts.** Despite good intentions, however, each faces difficulties in acting or stepping up, even when they know they should. These “obstacles to action” (i.e., peer pressure, fear of retribution, fear of embarrassment, uncertainty, etc.) keep well-intentioned people silent – and often regretting their silence.
2. **Obstacles to action don't just disappear.** Rather than pretending you can eradicate things like peer pressure or fear of retribution with a good speech or a reference to core values, work to create a safe space for members of your Wing community to acknowledge these obstacles. When an individual feels safe enough to acknowledge what makes it hard to step up in a high risk situation, he or she can then begin to develop realistic alternatives to intervening that would avoid triggering those specific obstacles.
3. **Acknowledge the legitimacy and universality of obstacles to action.** Avoid historically ineffective approaches to these obstacles to action such as: using shame or guilt to try to push through the obstacles; “forcing” them out through rules and threats; trying to eliminate them with a pep-talk or slogan; or simply pretending these obstacles don't exist. Instead, an honest dialogue about what makes it hard for individuals to intervene will allow for an opportunity to generate realistic solutions for intervention.
4. **Allow for individual personal growth, but don't depend on it.** The assumption is that individuals will not overcome their obstacles immediately, and generating realistic solutions is based on acknowledging that reality. However, it can be valuable to embed key messages about bystander intervention within the context of individual and Air Force values, ideals and identity. The Air Force



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is an institution already set up to be personally transformative; transforming civilians to Air Force members driven by a shared set of core values. As Commander, it is important to balance two messages – one aspirational and one practical.

- a. **Aspirational:** You are the most elite Air Force in the world. You are capable of great things. Rise to your role as wingman, and intervene in high risk situations.
- b. **Practical:** Even a “real wingman” can face obstacles to intervening in a high risk situation. It’s not what you do that defines you as a “real wingman,” but rather that you do something. Even if you cannot intervene in a situation directly, by getting others to intervene or by simply creating a distraction, you can accomplish the same goal.

In summary, what remains critical to the prevention of sexual assault are strategies to engage bystanders in taking actions to prevent it.