A Responsibility to Do What You Can

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Bystanders have a responsibility to intervene when witnessing a violent crime. The trust and personal liberty necessary to sustain our communities depend on our ability to interact free of violence, and as members of the community we are ethically bound to preserve peace. Violent crimes eat at the very core of a free society. The only real question is what form the intervention should take.

In self-defense classes, we often spend a great deal of time coaching our beginning students on how to use their voices. This serves a number of practical purposes, including helping students regulate their breathing to more effectively execute defensive techniques and maneuvers. A more basic goal is to raise the student’s awareness about the powerful effect a loud, forceful voice can play in disrupting an attack. Many attackers operate like predators, identifying targets by perceived weakness. A forceful voice projects strength, signaling to the attacker that his perception may be wrong. It also draws others’ attention to the attack.

*Calling 911 may be as far as some bystanders can go. Others, like off-duty police officers, may be able to end an attack altogether.*

But perhaps an even more important role of voice is its potential to disrupt an attack on other people. The simple act of yelling “stop” can transform a bystander into a protector.

Of course, individuals need to determine for themselves what level their intervention can take. For some, simply calling 911 may be as far as they can go. For others, like off-duty law enforcement personnel or citizens who have trained extensively in martial arts, their personal intervention can directly neutralize a threat or even end an attack altogether. And some skills can prevent deaths, if not stop crimes: after the explosions at the Boston Marathon, [dozens of medical professionals](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/17/us/physical-legacy-of-bomb-blasts-could-be-cruel-for-boston-marathon-victims.html) on the scene applied life-saving tourniquets and performed triage.

Whatever their skills, bystanders have an obligation to stand up for those under attack. Our free society depends on it.