

Anxiety motivates bystanders to intervene in bullying

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Credit: Wavebreakmedia

Many school pupils are in daily contact with bullying—as victims, bullies or witnesses. We know that the reactions of people around them are very significant, but what determines whether or not other pupils come to the victim's rescue? According to a group of Lund University researchers, the witnesses' own anxiety is a crucial factor.

In two new studies, researchers have investigated what is known as the [bystander effect](#), that is the willingness of eyewitnesses to intervene in the victim's defense in cases of bullying, and what affects it.

"It is perhaps not so surprising, but whether or not the bullied person belongs to the witness's own group plays a major role," says Tomas Jungert, associate professor in psychology at Lund University.

If the bullied person belongs to the witness's own group, a witness who takes action is usually driven by internal motivation. Internal motivation is stronger and more often leads to action than external motivation, which is driven by reward or outside pressure.

"When a witness intervenes and helps an unknown victim, it usually has more to do with external motivation than internal," says Tomas Jungert.

The Lund researchers also studied to what extent anxiety was a driving factor for the person intervening against bullying and came to this conclusion: the more susceptible to anxiety a person is, the more likely it is that they will intervene. However, this only applies when the bullied person and the witness are part of the same group.

According to the researchers, the fact that anxiety plays an important role depends on its ability to trigger a behavior: either the witness feels obliged to intervene to help the victim or they actively avoid placing themselves in an unpleasant situation. In both cases, it is a behavior that aims to reduce the witness's own anxiety.

"If the bullied person is someone they don't know, the simplest solution can be not to take any action at all," says Tomas Jungert. Burying your head in the sand is more difficult, on the other hand, if the victim belongs to the [witness](#)'s own in-group.

The researchers also investigated whether traditional bullying or cyber-bullying, i.e. via social media, are a factor in the witnesses' internal [motivation](#) to help the victim. It emerged that although traditional bullying was considered worse than cyber-bullying, pupils were more willing to intervene to defend the bullied person if the bullying took place online. Here, too, [anxiety](#) is believed to be an important factor in explaining the behavior, as it can feel less dangerous to intervene in the case of cyber-bullying than in physical, traditional bullying.

Jungert and his colleagues think that it is important for both pupils and teachers to reflect on and be aware of the driving forces that compel pupils to take action against bullying.

"Decent behavior has a domino effect and, over the long term, creates a healthier culture in schools."

There is currently a plethora of methods to reduce bullying in schools. Results vary, and many have little effect, as shown in a major international study published a few years ago.

Tomas Jungert says, "There is a need for more innovative, evidence-based approaches that take account of the complexities of bullying and bystander behavior; otherwise, the measures could at worst have the opposite effect."

More information: José Antonio Jiménez-Barbero et al, Effectiveness of anti-bullying school programs: A meta-analysis, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.12.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.12.015)

Tomas Jungert et al, Direct Bullying and Cyberbullying: Experimental Study of Bystanders' Motivation to Defend Victims and the Role of Anxiety and Identification With the Bully, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.616572](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.616572)

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