



# HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE BYSTANDER

BY LISA HANEY

**AIA POLANSKY, 34**, says she was running along Boston's Charles River at 6 am on a summer day when she noticed an approaching runner pulling down his shorts. "At first I thought he was just fixing himself or having a pee emergency," the personal trainer and self-defense speaker says. But, no—he was flashing her, Polansky realized after he exposed himself to her again as they passed on the path.

She wasn't having it.

Polansky chased after the flasher and confronted him—asking his name, grabbing his arm to keep him from running away, and yelling to bystanders to call 911. No one did. While Polansky dialed it herself, the man fled.

A surveillance video of the incident that police released to help identify the suspect went viral. There's something so surprising and satisfying about watching her fearlessly chasing down the suspect (something police don't recommend, by the way). It should be noted that Polansky is 6'1", very fit, and a former member of the Israeli military who's

trained in Krav Maga. But she insists her reaction wasn't because of her military background. "It's just my personality," she says. "If I'm in an uncomfortable situation, I want to confront it and deal with it."

What surprised—and really bothered—her is that no one helped.

Unfortunately, bystander inaction is common—and it only emboldens harassers and would-be criminals. "Crowd mentality is a very powerful thing," says Paul Grattan Jr., a policing fellow at the National Police Foundation and a sergeant with a major metropolitan police force. When no one else is responding, others are inclined not to respond either. But once one person takes action, others are likely to jump in to help.

"Stand up for somebody who's in need because it will almost always cause others to stand up for them—and you as well," Grattan advises. It's effective because it immediately tells the target that someone cares and is there to help them. "And it tells the harasser that there's more than one person here who wants nothing to do

with them," he says. "There's no doubt about it that there's strength in numbers."

That's the idea behind Hollaback!, a people-powered initiative to stop harassment. Cofounder Emily May says she was harassed on New York City streets a few times a day—including while running—in 2005, when she helped start the organization, which trains people on how to respond to harassment. "We still live in a world that's pretty sexist and racist and homophobic...and certain folks feel a desire to be really explicit about those implicit biases," May says. She believes street harassment comes from a place of wanting to make others feel inferior. "Like, let me remind you that even though you may feel really strong right now, while you are running, you are actually weak because you are still a woman," she says.

But Hollaback! aims to transform the culture that perpetuates harassment and violence, and recommends these "Five Ds" for bystander action. Remember them the next time you see a fellow runner being harassed.

1

## DIRECT

Say something quick, clear, and firm to confront the harasser to directly intervene. (Examples: "Hey! That's not OK." "Leave them alone.") Then check on the target to see if they're OK and ignore the harasser to avoid getting into a back-and-forth, which may escalate the situation. Only insert yourself if you feel secure, because the harassment can turn onto you. This is particularly true for women, May says.

2

## DISTRACT

Interrupt the incident to help derail it. Ask the runner being harassed for directions or the time, or pretend you know her and start talking. "It will eventually drown out the person doing the harassing," May says. "Creating a distraction can also mean physically getting in between those doing the harassment and their target," May says. For example, run between a runner and a car that's following her—if there's enough room and if you feel safe.

3

## DELEGATE

Recruit someone else to intervene. Look for an authority figure—a park ranger or police officer—or call 911. If you can, check in with the person being harassed first, May says. "Some people—particularly people of color or undocumented immigrants—may feel less safe with police presence," she says. Another way to delegate: Recruit bystanders and team up to use the Ds—for example, one of you can Distract while one of you Documents (see next).

4

## DOCUMENT

If someone is already helping the runner, take a video of the incident with your phone. Be discreet—if you're in the harasser's face, things could escalate. If the harasser is in a car, try to get a clear shot of the license plate. Also aim to capture landmarks such as street signs in your frame, and state the date and time clearly as you record. After the incident, give the video to the target and let her decide whether to share it with authorities or on social media.

5

## DELAY

Harassment on the run often happens quickly—a passing insult, a sudden grope or flash. If you can't act in the moment, check in with the target after the fact. "Just asking them if they are OK can have a huge impact on them," May says. "It makes them feel like they are less crazy. If you experience harassment and those around you pretend nothing happened, it's like, 'Wait, what? Why doesn't anybody care that this just happened to me?'"

## Join the Runners Alliance!

We've partnered with Hoka One One, Garmin, and Women's Health to create the Runners Alliance, an ongoing evidence-based initiative and toolkit. It's designed to connect communities around the world to stand together and take action against harassment and the endangerment women experience while running.

Visit [runnersworld.com/runnersalliance](https://runnersworld.com/runnersalliance) to sign up and get involved. In addition to the empowering personal stories and practical advice on these pages, we'll be publishing more strategies from experts, enlightening interviews with activists and runners, and breaking news. Also watch for our original documentary *Not Today*, which examines the issue of gender-based violence and aims to galvanize the running community to make the sport we all love safer for everyone.





## What to Do If You're Harassed

Although it's best to avoid a physical confrontation if possible, Aia Polansky had the right idea standing up to her flasher, according to Grattan. "Offenders who engage in this type of sexual harassment and lewd conduct thrive in an environment where victims are intimidated and hesitant to speak up," he says. Anything you can do to demonstrate strength, even if you're understandably scared, can deter a would-be criminal, he says. "A powerful victim is immediately a different force to be reckoned with," Grattan says.

May says to trust your instincts. If you decide to respond, one option is to reclaim your space by telling the harasser how you want their behavior to change, like: "I need you to stop talking to me right now." Or "I need you to stop touching me." You can also distract or delegate (see previous page).

"We know that if you do something to respond to harassment, either in the moment or afterward, that can reduce trauma—like increased anxiety or hypervigilance in public—in the long haul," May says. But don't beat yourself up if you didn't react how you wish you had in the moment. The response can even be after the incident—talking to your friends and family about your experience, getting trained in bystander intervention, or reporting the incident to authorities. "If you do decide to take action, let it be for you—not for the world or because you think you should," she says.

And, most important: "Remember you're awesome," May says. "So you can build the resilience to go back out and run again tomorrow." You have the right to be who you are, wherever you are, whatever you're doing. Harassment is never your fault—no matter where you're running or what you're wearing or how you respond. "Ultimately, there is no perfect response to harassment," May says. "Because it is their responsibility not to harass you, not your responsibility to have the perfect response to harassment."

## USE YOUR PHONE TO PROTECT YOURSELF

YOU MAY ALREADY be carrying a powerful safety tool when you run. If you're bringing your cell phone with you, make sure it's fully charged before you head out. In addition to taking a video to document a harasser, you can use it to:



**1. Track yourself.** Download an app that allows friends and family to monitor your location while you run. We like AllTrails Lifeline (info on p.56) or RoadID, which alerts your chosen contacts if you stop moving or go off course and don't respond to the app's alerts. Or, call or text a friend to let them know you're headed out for a run and send a pin with your starting location.



**2. Call a friend.** If you're running through a sketchy area or feel like you're being followed, call someone. (Or even pretend to.) Tell them where you are and start an ongoing conversation. It tells the harasser that you're not really alone and that you can easily get help. "Criminals prefer as ideal an environment as possible when selecting targets or choosing when to act, and anything that disrupts that is beneficial," Grattan says.



**3. Send out an SOS.** Check your phone's emergency features now. That way you won't be trying to figure it out when you need it, Grattan says. For example, on an iPhone 8 or later: Press and hold the right-side button and one of the volume buttons to engage the Emergency SOS feature. After a countdown, the phone will automatically call authorities and text your location to your emergency contacts.



**4. Dial 911.** "I've encountered many people who say they didn't want to call 911 because they didn't think it was serious enough," Grattan says. "If your instinct tells you something is suspicious or troubling, you can call 911." This will do two things: generate a police response, and log your location (you should report it to the operator, though many jurisdictions will get it automatically via the 911 system).



**5. Defend yourself.** If you're actually being attacked, your phone can help you fight back. While it may not be an ideal weapon, "it is a blunt instrument that could be used to strike an attacker in the face," Grattan says. Really, anything you're already carrying can be used to your advantage. "Having any object in your hand to defend yourself is better than none," he says.

## HEY, DUDES! HERE'S HOW TO MAKE WOMEN MORE COMFORTABLE WHILE RUNNING

**FIRST, THE BAD news:** Your body language can make you appear threatening, even if you have only the purest of intentions. "Fifty-five percent of our communication as humans is nonverbal," says Jan Hargrave, a Houston-based body language expert. Especially when you're out running—an activity that involves little talking—actions speak much louder than words. The good news? It's easy not to be a creep. Here's how you can make sure other runners always feel safe around you. —A.C. Shilton



**Don't Sneak Up** / Take extra care when passing another runner from behind. "When someone is coming at us from the side, our natural inclination is to protect our core," Hargrave says. Obviously, you have to pass, which requires being side-by-side. Make your presence known early on. Give a friendly verbal warning as you approach: "Passing on your left!" Then, pass quickly and don't linger.



**Leave a Bubble** / Hargrave says that a three-foot bubble is necessary for folks to not feel like you're getting too close. When you pass, don't infringe on this radius. Move to the side when you're 4 to 5 feet behind the person you're passing, then leave plenty of room as you navigate around. If oncoming traffic stops you from passing, drop back so you don't burst that bubble.



**Keep Conversations Respectful** / A general rule: Don't say anything to a woman that you wouldn't say to a man. Most women have endured far too many comments about their bodies, which can make even innocuous remarks seem loaded. Don't comment on her appearance, express surprise at her pace, or say anything sexual. These interactions can feel patronizing or threatening.



**Eye Contact Is OK, But Don't Stare** / When you're running toward another runner, it's fine to make eye contact, but keep it brief. "One hundred percent eye contact is weird," says Hargrave. Make eye contact and then look down or away. For a cordial, nonthreatening touch, give a slight head nod or wave. Nothing more is required.



**Don't Creep** / Maybe your route happens to be identical to that of the woman running just ahead of you. And maybe you happen to be running at the same pace. It's possible she doesn't notice you trailing behind her turn-for-turn—but chances are she does, says Hargrave. "If we think someone is following us, it's scary." Back off a bit, says Hargrave. Better yet, turn and switch up your route.

## The Safest Place to Run

Aia Polansky's story shows that harassers can strike even on seemingly safe runs. Still, there are some common characteristics that generally make an area safer. "Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) is a series of strategies for how we design places to look and feel safe, and deter criminal activity," says Alison Bourquin, a runner and landscape architect, urban planner, and urban designer in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. A growing body of research suggests they're effective in reducing both crime and the fear of it. Look for these elements when choosing where to run:

**Good visibility.** "If we have a wide field of vision and we can see those things that might be threats or dangers to us, we feel safer than if we're in a narrow, constricted space with blind spots," Bourquin says. For example, a wide city sidewalk is better than a dark alley or breezeway where you can't see if there's someone hiding in a corner. A straight trail is better than one with a lot of switchbacks.

**Good lighting.** Look for ample and evenly placed lighting—usually every 100 to 200 feet. Ambient light from city buildings is helpful, too. If you're in a rural area, it can get really dark, so wearing a headlamp is a good idea.

**Regular maintenance.** Tidy trails, parks, or city streets signal a sense of ownership and tell would-be criminals that people are taking care of the space. Litter and uncut lawns, on the other hand, lend an air of deterioration and a tolerance for disorder—and have been associated with higher crime, according to a 2015 Baltimore study. Overgrown landscaping also gives people places to hide, Bourquin says, while trimmed landscaping allows for more visibility into a space.

**Extra eyes.** The more people in the area, the less likely you are to be targeted and the greater the likelihood that someone will respond if you're in danger, Grattan says.

## Make Your Go-To Running Spots Safer

### Know who to talk to.

To advocate for maintenance or improvement of a municipal park or trail—like trimming overgrown areas or installing more lighting—call your city's parks and rec department or your city council members. It's within your rights as a local citizen to ask them to keep those trails safe and maintained, Bourquin says. Some regional trails run through official transit districts. "Follow your district on social media or sign up for their emails or newsletters," Bourquin says. "That way you'll know when they are looking for comments on how they prioritize funds. Your input matters."

### Join a trail org.

"Getting involved with those nonprofit trail organizations can be a great way to help see more trails built around your community," Bourquin says. Search for trail organizations in your state on the Partnership for the National Trails System website ([pnts.org](http://pnts.org)).

### Team up with cyclists.

Cyclists and cycling organizations tend to be more involved with advocating for trail building, safety, and maintenance than runners are, Bourquin says. Ask at a local bike shop if they can point you to someone who is working on trail advocacy, and then volunteer to help.

### Form a run patrol.

Enlist a local running club or a few of your running friends for a moving neighborhood watch. Informally adopt a trail or roadside route and run it together once a week. Along the way, pick up any litter and notice any burnt-out streetlights, overgrown areas, or suspicious activity so you can report it. "That would be great to see from the running community—to take more ownership of the places where we spend so much of our time," Bourquin says.



# HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

BY STEPHEN CAMELIO

**YOU DON'T NEED** to learn how to defend yourself from an attacker. But many women feel safer with some self-defense know-how. Runner and Krav Maga instructor Julie Barron Morrill has lots of experience teaching runners how to defend themselves: Over the past six years, she's taught training group BostonFit, former Olympian Kara Goucher's Podium women's retreats participants, and other running groups around the country. ¶ "When things get physical, I teach four main moves," says Morrill. "How to punch, kick, use your knees, and use your elbows." With her expert advice on how to supercharge those moves, you can cause enough pain or confusion in your attacker to get away. Increase your power by using hard, bony parts of your body against the soft and fleshy parts of your attacker's body. Aim for the stomach, groin, nose, throat, and inner thigh. ¶



#### Elbow Strike

Elbows are pointy, hard, and able to move in multiple planes—backward, forward, cross-body, up, and down—making them the ultimate weapon in close-quarters fighting when you can't fully extend your arms or legs. If someone grabs you from behind, drive your elbow straight back into their sternum or stomach.



#### Knee Strike

If you can't use your hands—say, if someone grabs you closely from the front—knee them in the lower body. "Aim for the attacker's groin or their inner thigh," Morrill says. "Runners have really strong legs, so using knees can be very effective." Kick without extending your leg, and aim with the top of the knee.



#### Hand Strike

"The trick is not to put your thumb under your fingers," Morrill explains. "Keep it tight close to your fingers, then keep a straight wrist and knuckle perpendicular to the ground as you punch with the top two knuckles." If you're not used to hitting with a fist, try striking with the heel of your palm instead—it can be easier to do.



#### Lower Leg Strike

In Krav Maga, "we're known for our devastating groin kicks," Morrill says. Aim straight into the groin. Ideally, you want to strike with the top of your foot or the lower part of your shin. "They are the boniest and therefore hardest parts of you, so you can do the most damage and not hurt your toes," says Morrill.