

Never a Lemming Be!

Background

A bystander is someone who observes an event but does not take part in it. This bystander is typically a chance spectator. The behavior of bystanders is complex and related to several psychological influences on group behavior. Understanding these influences will help students develop into proactive citizens. This class meeting uses examples from the animal world to illustrate concepts about group behavior.

Learn Outcomes

By the end of this session, students will be able to

- Define “bystander effect,” “herd mentality,” and “altruism”
- Describe how understanding group behavior relates to bullying prevention

Materials Needed

- Never a Lemming Be! (end of this document)
- Whiteboard and markers

Preparation Needed

- Write the three terms on the board: “herd mentality,” bystander effect,” and “altruism.”
- Copies of Never a Lemming Be! (decide if they need individual copies or sets to share in pairs/groups)

Class Meeting Outline

1. Assemble students in a circle. **Our class meeting today will focus on several things that influence bystanders’ behavior.** Make sure everyone understands the definition of a bystander (a witness or observer). **We will discuss different ways bystanders behave and how bystanders can act as good citizens.**
2. Point out that the terms on the board describe types of group behavior. **Sometimes observing animal behavior can help us understand human behavior.** Explain “herd mentality” and use the following story about the lemming to illustrate this behavior. **The lemming is a small rodent that lives in the Arctic. When the population of lemmings in a area grows too large, lemmings migrate in large groups. If the group of migrating lemmings arrives at the edge of a large body of water, the herd instinct is so strong that the lemmings may press forward and follow their**

leaders by jumping into the water. Sometimes, this has resulted in their death. (It is, however, a myth that lemmings “commit suicide” by jumping off cliffs in mass numbers.)

- 3. We sometimes use the saying “like lemmings to the sea” to describe group behavior. What does this saying mean?** (The saying is used to describe someone’s decision to do something that is not good for him or her just because everyone else is doing it.”
- 4. Divide the class into pairs/small groups. Give each group copies of the handout. Instruct the groups to read the definitions of the terms and then discuss how the term applies to human behavior. Don’t use any names, but discuss with your group examples that you have seen or heard about that illustrate each of these terms. Think of things that happen here at school, at home, or other places you go.**
- 5. Have students return to the large group for the discussion.**

Discussion Questions

- 1. How does the “herd mentality” sometimes limit what you think you should do to help another student? Even if you think you should do something to help another person, how does the herd mentality sometimes stop you from taking action?**
- 2. If a whole group of students sees that another student needs help and no one does anything, what message does that send to the student in need? To all the students in the group?**
- 3. If no one helps an individual in need, what does that say about the school itself?**
- 4. If you are a bystander when someone is being bullied, how can you overcome the herd mentality and the bystander effect and do something to help the student being bullied? What kinds of things might you do?**
- 5. Why do you think that some people are altruistic and some are not? What do you think makes the difference? How important is altruistic behavior in a civilized society? How about in a school?**

Wrap-Up

- 1. Responding to others who need your help because they are being bullied or having some other kind of trouble can be a really hard thing to do. Being a helpful bystander means thinking for yourself and not just following along with what everyone else is doing. Sometimes it means stepping outside your group and standing with someone else who is all alone.**
- 2. Encourage additional questions and comments.**

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Instructions: Read the definitions of group behavior and answer the questions.

- 1. Herd mentality. The term refers to people who go along unquestioningly with popular opinion or behavior even in the presence of potentially dangerous consequences. Taken from the animal world, the term refers to the tendency of herd animals to follow their leaders blindly, even when doing so presents a danger. Examples include sheep leaping off a cliff after their leader, wild horses stampeding through fencing or other dangerous obstacles, and lemmings swimming to exhaustion in a group. When have you seen herd mentality in yourself or people you know?**

- 2. Bystander effect. This term refers to a phenomenon whereby a bystander is less likely to help an individual in need of assistance if there are other people present. In fact, the greater the number of people present, the less likely it is that anyone will offer help. Each person assumes that someone else will help so no one does or people see that no one else is helping so they do the same. When have you seen or heard about the bystander effect?**

- 3. Altruism. This term means unselfish concern for others, even when one's own welfare may be compromised. Individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, and Mother Teresa exemplified altruistic behavior. Altruism is also observable in the animal world. Dolphins, geese, and elephants all exhibit such behavior. For example, migrating geese will leave their flock to stay with a sick or weakened goose. Dolphins cooperate to keep a sick or dying dolphin near the ocean surface so it will not drown. Elephants gather around sick, wounded, or newborn elephants in their herd to protect them from predators. What examples of altruism do you know about? Who is an altruistic person you know about?**