

Empowering the Bystander: What to Do If You've Witnessed Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA), is a devastating form of online abuse that encompasses **nonconsensual dissemination of intimate images (NDII)**, **synthetic NDII**, and **sextortion**.

Nonconsensual Dissemination of Intimate Images (NDII) is often called “revenge porn” and refers to the distribution of private, sexually explicit images of individuals without their consent. **Synthetic NDII**, or “deep fake” images, refer to pornographic images that are partially or entirely fabricated- in other words, they are not “real” images. **Sextortion** is the act of threatening to expose someone’s nude or sexually explicit image, whether real or fabricated, often with a demand for money.

It can be alarming to come across this kind of content in a chat or online, and knowing how to respond can be confusing. This guide aims to empower bystanders with actionable steps to take when faced with such situations, always keeping in mind the well-being of all involved.

All bystanders can make a positive difference and contribute to a safer internet. Thank you in advance for your efforts to promote an online culture that centers consent.

1. You might come across an intimate image in an online forum or post, in a group chat, on an adult pornography site, or on any number of websites or apps. If you are uncertain whether the image was distributed consensually, it’s best to **err on the side of caution. Refrain from forwarding or reposting the image and avoid showing it from your device to others in person.** You can play a crucial role in limiting the spread of the image and reducing the potential for harm to the victim-survivor. Plus, forwarding or showing the images to someone might even have legal repercussions for you.
2. You can alert the individual depicted in the image if you feel safe and comfortable doing so. Your communication may be shocking and

overwhelming for that person, so you may want to share supportive resources, like the **CCRI Safety Center** (<https://cybercivilrights.org/ccri-safety-center>) and StopNCII.org. If the victim-survivor attends a U.S. educational institution, a Title IX Coordinator might also be a helpful contact. The CCRI Safety Center also lists organizations who might be able to offer support to victim-survivors who are outside of the U.S.: <https://cybercivilrights.org/ccri-safety-center>

3. If you are acquainted with the victim-survivor, you might also offer your moral support. You can use affirming language, like **“You’re not alone,” “There’s help available,” and “This is not your fault.”** Remember, the offender is always responsible for IBSA perpetration, and placing blame on the victim is never the right approach. Avoid questions like, “Why did you take that photo?” or “How come you didn’t have two-factor authentication on?” Also, should the individual show signs of severe distress or discuss self-harm, you can suggest that they contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline or a local mental health provider.
4. If you are on a public or semi-public forum, it is generally most helpful to refrain from “liking” or commenting on the post, even if you are commenting in protest against the content, as this will likely only drive more traffic to the harmful material. Instead, you can report the content directly to the tech platform.
5. If you are acquainted with the offender, you could consider the possibility of reaching out. However, prioritizing your own safety is paramount. This may be a good time to turn on two-factor authentication; review privacy settings for your social media accounts and friend lists; and research where your name and contact information are public. Evaluate any potential risks to yourself, and if the situation feels too precarious, it could be best to refrain from engaging.
6. If you do decide to contact the offender, you might simply share, “I think you should delete that. It could cause a lot of harm. Plus, you might even get into a lot of trouble.” You could also exit the chat, page, or group, or unfollow or block the offender, if you prefer. Whether or not you communicate with the offender, it still is best to report the content to the tech platform.

7. Some pages or groups may have multiple offenders and many pieces of nonconsensual content. You can report the entire page or account to the tech platform. If the forum is targeting students from an educational institution, you could also consider contacting that school's Title IX department.
8. You can report a company that is posting or hosting IBSA to the Federal Trade Commission here: <https://reportfraud.ftc.gov/#/>
9. If the situation is particularly severe and you believe that you or others may be in danger, you could also consider contacting law enforcement.
10. Many bystanders become passionate advocates for internet safety, and actively seek additional ways to create positive culture change online. If you'd like to promote a safe online culture within a university community, you can ask student centers to post this advisory; consider joining or establishing a club dedicated to cyber civil rights; suggest that an academic department introduce a course on the subject; or help coordinate a campus screening of a film on the subject, like "Netizens" (<https://www.netizensfilm.com/>).
11. Those who are not part of a campus community can explore other ways to raise local awareness about IBSA. This could include requesting a speaker to present to your workplace; making a donation to an organization that works in this subject area; or sharing this advisory or other related materials with friends.
12. As you are following the steps above, make sure to take care of yourself. Viewing IBSA online can have a harmful effect on anyone, including bystanders. If you feel any distress, it might help to talk to a counselor; limit your media consumption for a few days; surround yourself with conscientious loved ones; or engage in activities that you find restorative.

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