



If You See Something, Say Something

“If You See Something, Say Something” is a U.S. Department of Homeland Security national campaign that has become the unofficial slogan of post-9/11 America. I kind of hate it. What people report—a person who doesn’t look like they belong in a certain neighborhood, a backpack sitting near a school entrance, a group of teenagers at a park—shows just how misguided it is to put surveillance in the hands of everyday citizens.

But if we can flip the script a bit, maybe we can reform that slogan and make it work to our advantage. I got this idea today after I finished working out with my trainer. Tired and sweaty, with not a bit of makeup on and every single hair out of place, a woman I know from my yoga class stopped me. We see one another several times a week at the Y and have short conversations in passing, but I wasn’t prepared for what she said to me. “I wanted to tell you how great you look,” she said, a beautiful smile on her face. We talked a minute about how my health has improved since last winter, about yoga, about the workouts we do at the Y. As she left, she turned and said, “I just wanted to let you know. You look so healthy. And happy. And so much younger.”

That encounter made my day! Most of the time I am quite capable of being my own best cheerleader, but sometimes I struggle. Today was one of those days. I woke up tired and cranky and wasn’t lifting quite as well as I wanted to in the weight room. But hearing Ruth’s words of encouragement helped me refocus and realize that all of the hard work I’ve been putting in is paying off. She helped me remember why I’m getting up in the dark and going to the gym every morning—to be healthier, and happier. Oh, and yes, to look and feel younger, too.

She saw something and she said something. We should all do more of that. Not by spying on our neighbors or being suspicious of strangers, but by being on the lookout for ways to compliment them.

We need to be more willing to see the goodness and the beauty in people—and when we do, we need to tell them that we noticed.

One problem with most compliments is that they address something material—the things someone owns or uses or wears. A genuine compliment addresses a person’s traits or behaviors or actions. It’s okay if you like someone’s car or shoes, but that doesn’t say anything about them except that they have the money to buy that car or those shoes, and possibly that you share a similar sense of style. But if you compliment someone on their kindness, their hard work, their cheerfulness, it says something about the person. And it says something about you, too.

Too many times we walk through the world completely self-contained, only noticing others when they disrupt our bubble of solitude—and then, whether inwardly or outwardly, we criticize them for that disruption.

When we take the time to notice others—when we see something and say something—it means we’ve become outwardly focused. It means we have stopped judging and started appreciating what others contribute to our lives.

How much more pleasant would our days be if we spent them truly seeing those around us, greeting them and acknowledging their presence?

It’s hard to give, and to receive, a genuine compliment. And we always run the risk that someone, especially someone we don’t know well, will simply give us a blank stare when we offer it. But you never know who might need a little boost, and the chance that you will make someone’s day a bit brighter is worth the risk. I’m throwing out the challenge: The next time you see something, say something.

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