

## Stalking

by Jim Kendall, LCSW

Stalking is a form of domestic violence that renders the victim feeling helpless, paranoid and fearful. It can take the form of communications by e-mail, letters, telephone, physical encounters, or threats.

It is estimated that 1.4 million Americans will be victims of stalking each year. 1 in 12 women and 1 in 45 men will be stalked in their lifetimes according to research found in *Stalking in America: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey* (NIJ-CDC) in April 1998. 75% of the stalking victims are women and 87% of the stalking perpetrators are men.

The reasons for stalking varies but there are 3 broad categories of perpetrators:

1. Intimate partner stalkers - Perpetrated by the person who "just can't let go". Often others are sympathetic and feel sorry for the stalker who refuses to accept that the relationship has ended. The stalker continues to harass, threaten and intimidate the victim. Often these stalkers were controlling in the relationships. Intimate partner stalkers tend to be the most lethal because they have an intimate knowledge of their victims' routines, schedule, and life habits. Victims in 69% of female homicide cases were stalked while in a relationship with their stalker and victims in 88% of female homicide cases were stalked after the relationship ended (National Violence Against Women Survey). Over half of the stalkers fall into this category.
2. Delusional stalkers - These individuals frequently have had little, if any, contact with the victim but due to a mental illness have some belief that there is a relationship with the victim. They believe that the victim loves them or should love them. Some know they don't have a current relationship but believe that they are destined to in the future (John Hinckley Jr.'s obsession with Jodi Foster serves as an example). The profile of this category of stalker is generally someone who is unmarried, socially immature, and a loner. Those who are in the helping professions (healthcare, clergy, teaching, etc) are particularly vulnerable to this kind of delusional stalker because they may have treated the stalker with kindness or a caring demeanor. The stalker has difficulty separating appropriate social graces from the delusion of intimacy. Thus the fantasy is blown out of all reality proportions. These victims may be stalked for years.
3. Vengeful stalkers- Angry with the victim over some feeling of being wronged, real or imagined. Disgruntled employees can stalk former bosses, co-workers, or entire companies. Some stalk because of delusions, to get even, or because they feel they themselves were victims.

Those people who are being stalked are crime victims. Being a "stalking victim" says much about the perpetrator and nothing about the victim. The victim may or may not know the perpetrator. How the victim is able to deal with this situation becomes

paramount. This crime does change the victim's life. It robs the victim of any feelings of safety and requires extra precautions that others don't have to take. It is not fair! There is nothing fair about being stalked.

Some tips to consider:

1. Document every contact. Keep any potential evidence (answering machine tapes, cards, e-mails, letters, etc.)
2. Be alert. If it appears that someone has been in your house, contact the police.
3. Change the locks on your door so you know who has access.
4. If the stalker calls you on your home phone, don't change it. Get an answering machine and never answer it. Then get a new unlisted phone number and give that number to your friends. This way the stalker will think he/she is getting through to you. You can then keep a taped record of calls. Never pick up when he/she calls. Get a cell phone and keep it with you so if the stalker cuts your phone line, you can call for help. Remember that if you close off one avenue for a stalker, they will seek another, which might be worse.
5. Use technology for your advantage-Block your address at the DMV and Voter Registration. Get a P.O. Box for mail and use that address on checks. Program the phone to block caller ID from identifying your number. Screen your calls. Get caller ID. Destroy discarded mail.
6. Never go anywhere alone.
7. Drive on streets that you know and if you are being followed drive to a police station or other safe place.
8. Do not confront the stalker on our own. After letting them know you are not talking to them, hang up. Avoid them.
9. Take a self-defense course. Remain vigilant.
10. Notify the Security Officer, your supervisor, or someone in your place of business so that the necessary safeguards can be put in place. Stalking not only places the victim in danger but also those around them, particularly if the stalker perceives them to be in the way. Some suggest learning about the criteria for restraining orders and obtaining one if you can legally do so. This doesn't prevent the stalking. It serves as a legal reason for the police to act after the order is violated. In some cases, restraining orders will make things worse. The stalker views it as a humiliating announcement of rejection to the world that you want nothing to do with him/her. Intimate stalkers, often controlling partners, are not likely to adhere to a restraining order. Delusional stalkers, by definition, lack the judgement and reasoning to stop their actions just because of a piece of paper. Be aware of how the local police view such orders and whether they arrest to jail or just give citations.

If you are a victim of stalking and a member of the faculty and staff at Vanderbilt, please contact the Vanderbilt Police Department 322-2745, Project Safe 322-1333 or the Work/Life Connections/EAP at 615-936-1327 for support during this very difficult time.

**Useful Reference:**

*I Know You Really Love Me; A Psychiatrist's Journal of Erotomania, Stalking and Obsessive Love* by Doreen Orion, M.D.