



Five STEPS to Helping Stalking Victims

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In 2011 the Center for Disease Control reported, from a national household survey, that 1 in 6 women and 1 in 19 men will be stalked in his or her lifetime. Stalking can be defined as experiencing unwanted and repeated contact, intrusion, and/or surveillance which causes the target to feel very fearful or concerned for their safety or concerned for the safety of someone close to them.

Stalking is a pattern of behavior that can be unpredictable, frightening, and dangerous. It is NOT accidental and it is not a crime of passion or too much love. Rather, stalking is a systematic, intentional, and deliberate set of tactics designed to maintain an unwanted relationship to control, intimidate, and/or

destroy the target. Stalking might be thought of much like a predator hunting its prey.

Often the stalker is someone the target knows or had a prior relationship with. However, in some cases the stalker is someone the victim doesn't know or has

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barely met. When the victim and the stalker are intimate or ex-intimate partners, stalking often

begins during the relationship and continues into separation. Stalking can also start after a separation or after a no-contact order has been issued.

While research shows that stalking is devastating for victims and costly to communities, when victims seek help their situation is often minimized, denied or dismissed by friends and family as well as agencies that victims sometimes turn to for help.

Working with stalking victims can be challenging and time consuming. This article describes five basic STEPS that every helping professional can address with stalking victims, even when time is limited.

See It

The first step is to acknowledge what is happening. Victims who recognized their situation as stalking were more likely to seek help. One simple question can open the discussion about stalking: "Is someone repeatedly following or watching you, showing up unexpectedly, or communicating with you in ways that seem obsessive or make you concerned for your safety?" Exploring the answer to this question and talking about these behaviors as stalking should help to give you and the victim the bigger picture of what is happening and how it is affecting the victim's life. Some victims recognize they are being stalked. In those cases it is important to validate their experiences.

Threat

The second step is to clearly explain that stalking is a "red flag" for life sabotage, psychological harm and violence. Even when victims realize they are being stalked, they often downplay or minimize their level of risk. Stalking has harmful implications for victims' safety, mental health, financial security, housing, and for the safety of their children, other family members, and friends. The key here is to help identify the victim's unique vulnerability or risk. Understanding the unique vulnerability is key for safety planning.

"One of the most helpful things they did was validate my experience. While this may sound like a small thing, you'd be surprised at how many people dismiss this kind of situation as 'love' or suspect the victim of exaggeration. It gave me permission to follow my intuition which was telling me this was a dangerous situation, but I didn't want to believe it. They also offered very specific advice about how to increase my safety. Without a doubt, they saved my life by believing me and helping me protect myself."

- Kate Brennan

Evidence

Stalking is a crime for which victims must often take an active role in their ongoing safety as well as in their own evidence collection to document the crime. Victims should document, in a journal or in another organized way, each incident including: dates, times, what happened, vehicle and license plate information, witnesses to the incident or people they talked to afterwards (and contact information for these witnesses), and their feelings about what happened (e.g. fear, anxiety). Victims should also document how the stalking has affected them and any changes they made in their daily lives (e.g. relocated, changed jobs, installed new locks). Tell the victim to take photos when possible and save any evidence. Have them print or take screen shots of postings, texts, emails, and other online contacts, or ask police to download digital evidence. Have witnesses write their version of the incident and ask if they would consider giving a statement to police if it becomes necessary. Also, victims should be told to obtain and keep copies of all police reports. There are two main reasons to document. First, documenting what is happening can help others understand the **big picture** of the situation rather than incidents. Preserving corroborating evidence also helps others understand that the offender is engaging in a pattern of deliberate and intentional behavior. Second, having documentation can help with safety planning by showing safety vulnerabilities.

Protection

Those being targeted by stalking must engage in active and ongoing safety planning. The goal should be to make it as difficult as possible for the stalker. Unfortunately, sometimes safety planning means making some lifestyle changes such as changing privacy settings on social media sites (e.g. Facebook or Twitter), screening calls, making changes around their living situation (e.g. installing good outside lighting, changing locks, making sure doors are solid, keeping windows locked), obtaining a different cell phone number or getting an additional cell phone, altering their daily routine, avoiding going out alone, and in extreme cases, relocating. It is also important that victims are very clear with stalkers that the harassment and stalking is unwanted. Victims should document how the stalker was notified that the harassment, stalking, and contact is not wanted and should stop. Victims should also document the stalkers' response to the request. Then victims need to avoid or diminish contact with the stalker as much as possible. Some victims have prosecutors or private attorneys send a cease and desist letter to the stalker, which warns the stalker that further contact or harassment may result in legal action.

Support

It is crucial that those being targeted for stalking tell others, seek formal agency support, and persist in getting help. Telling trusted others (roommates, friends, family, professors, childcare, employers, neighbors, etc.) about the situation can provide needed emotional support and help with thinking through safety measures. It also means more people are on the lookout for the stalker if he or she comes around the victim's home, class, or work. Victims also need to make it clear that people should not provide information about them to the stalker, no matter how benign the request may seem. Victims should devise code words with friends, family, roommates, and co-workers if possible to signal when they need immediate help.

You and the victims may also want to consult the Stalking Resource Center www.victimsofcrime.org/src and www.OutrageUs.org. OutrageUs.org is a web-based nonprofit that features multi-media resources, tools, and research-informed strategies to help individuals and communities address stalking. The site can help victims understand what is happening to them and what to do about it. They can hear about the experiences of other stalking survivors through mini-documentaries featured on the site, and learn about resources specifically designed for stalking victims and survivors.

Summary

Each interaction with stalking victims can be an important step to increase victim safety and offender accountability. Every time you help victims put the pieces together and encourage them to take an active role in planning for their safety and building a case by documenting their experiences, they take away some of the stalker's power. Communities must demonstrate to stalkers that they are no longer in charge. We all need to do our part to help victims reclaim their lives and take action to stop their stalkers.

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