

Overview

Several murders of stalking victims have highlighted the fact that people who stalk can be very dangerous. Stalkers can threaten, attack, sexually assault and even kill their victims. Unfortunately, there is no single psychological or behavioral profile that can predict what stalkers will do. Stalkers' behaviors can escalate, from more indirect ways of making contact (e.g. sending email or repeated phone calling) to more personal ways (delivering things to the victim's doorstep or showing up at their work).

Many victims struggle with how to respond to the stalker. Some victims try to reason with the stalker, try to "let them down easy" or "be nice" in hopes of getting the stalker to stop the behavior. Some victims tell themselves that the behavior "isn't that bad" or other sentiments that minimize the stalking behavior. Other victims may confront or threaten the stalker and/or try to "fight back." These methods rarely work because stalkers are actually encouraged by any contact with the victim, even negative interactions.

Victims of stalking can not predict what stalkers will do but can determine their own responses to the stalking behavior. Personal safety and harm prevention is of the utmost importance for victims. While victims cannot control the stalking behavior, they can be empowered to take steps to keep themselves, family and loved ones safe. The creation of a safety plan can assist victims in doing this. You may direct victims of stalking to your local domestic violence program. Advocates are available to help victims with safety planning and other resources including safety kits. You may visit www.ndcaws.org to locate the agency closest to your campus.

Stalking Safety Plan – What is it?

A safety plan is a combination of suggestions, plans, and responses created to help victims reduce their risk of harm. It is a tool designed in response to the victim's specific situation that evaluates what the victim is currently experiencing, incorporates the pattern of previous behavior, and examines options that will positively impact the victim's safety. In a safety plan, the factors that are causing or contributing to the risk of harm to the victim and her/his loved ones are identified and interventions are developed.

Advocates and Stalking Safety Planning

While victims can make safety plans on their own, it is often helpful to enlist the assistance of trained professionals. These professionals, including advocates and law enforcement officers, can help a victim determine which options will best enhance their safety and will work to devise a safety plan to address each unique situation and circumstance. Victim advocates can be found in local domestic violence and rape crisis programs, as well as in victim assistance programs in local prosecutors' offices and in some law enforcement agencies. If you do not know how to find an advocate, contact the North Dakota Council on Abused Women's Services at 1-888-255-6240 or www.ndcaws.org.

Stalking Safety Plans – What to Include

When safety planning, victims can consider what is known about the stalker, the people who might help, how to improve safety in one's environment, and what to do

in case of an emergency. The average stalking case lasts approximately two years; therefore, safety planning must begin when the victim first identifies the stalking behavior and continue throughout the duration of the case. Safety plans need to be re-evaluated and updated continuously as the stalker's behavior, the victim's routines, and access to services and support changes.

Below are suggestions to consider when developing a stalking safety plan. This is not an exhaustive list. In a safety plan, any recommended strategy must focus on what the victim feels will work in her best interest at any given point in time.

Documentation of Stalking and Reporting to Police

Victims are encouraged to keep a log of all stalking behaviors including e-mails and phone messages. The log, as well as any gifts or letters the stalker sends the victim, can be collected and used as evidence. The evidence will help prove what has been going on if the victim decides to report the stalking to the police or apply for a protective order.

Rely on Trusted People

Many victims have found simple ways to make the stalking affect them less. They may ask someone else to pick up and sort their mail, get a second phone number given only to trusted people, or have people at work or school screen phone calls or inform the police if the stalker shows up. Relying on trusted friends and family is important for victims of stalking to help keep victims safer and also reduce the isolation and feelings of desperation that stalking victims may experience.

Technology Safety Planning

Stalkers use technology to assist them in stalking their victims in various ways. It is important to consider how to victims may be harmed by stalkers' use of technology. Stalkers use the Internet to contact or post things about the victim on message board or discussion forums. They may also verbally attack or threaten victims in chat rooms. Some stalkers will post threatening or personal information about the victim – including the victim's full name and address. Often stalkers will e-mail the victim, or fill their in-box with spam and have been known to send viruses or other harmful programs to victims' computers. These threatening messages should be saved, especially if the victim is considering contacting the police with the case.

If stalkers have access to a victim's computer, they can track them by looking at the history or websites visited on the computer. Also, stalkers have been known to install Spyware software on computers (sometimes sent through e-mail) that sends them a copy of every keystroke made, including passwords, Web sites visited, and e-mails sent. Spyware is very difficult to detect and a victim will likely not know she has it on her computer. If a victim believes s/he has a Spyware program on her/his computer, it is important the victim talk to a trained advocate.

Stalkers use cell phones enabled with Global Positioning System (GPS) to track victims. GPS technology can also be used to track or follow victims by placing them in the victim's car and will be able to tell everywhere the car travels. When safety planning with a victim about technology issues, ask a victim if her stalker has ever had access to her phone or computer. If so, it may be important to stop using the phone or computer, or only use it in a manner that will not give the stalker any

information about the victim's location.

It is also important for victims of stalking to remain diligent about protecting their personal information that could be saved in databases. Businesses, for example, collect personal information about people, including addresses, phone numbers, last names, etc. This information can sometimes be accessed and exploited by stalkers. One stalking victim's ex-boyfriend learned of her new address by "innocently" inquiring at the local oil change station if she had recently brought in their car for an oil change. Because that business had her information stored, they gave the stalker the address the victim had wanted to keep unknown to the stalker. Victims are encouraged to consider who might have their personal information. They should instruct businesses to not give out any personal information. In many instances, victims can ask that their account be password protected. This password should be one only known to the victim and no information should be released or discussed until the password has been verified.

Although no safety plan guarantees safety, such plans are valuable and important tools to keep victims safer, document incidents that happen with the perpetrator, make surroundings more secure, and identify people who can help. For more information on technology safety tips and trainings please contact Dana Mees at 1-888-255-6240 ext. 14.

Stalking Safety Tips

Safety Anytime:

- If possible, have a phone nearby at all times, preferably one to which the stalker has never had access. Memorize emergency numbers, and make sure that 911 and helpful family or friends are on speed dial.
- Treat all threats, direct and indirect, as legitimate and inform law enforcement immediately.
- Vary routines, including changing routes to work, school, the grocery store, and other places regularly frequented. Limit time spent alone and try to shop at different stores and visit different bank branches.
- When out of the house or work environment, try not to travel alone and try to stay in public areas.
- Get a new, unlisted phone number. Leave the old number active and connected to an answering machine or voicemail. Have a friend, advocate, or law enforcement screen the calls, and save any messages from the stalker. These messages, particularly those that are explicitly abusive or threatening, can be critical evidence for law enforcement to build a stalking case against the offender.
- Do not interact with the person stalking or harassing you. Responding to stalker's actions may reinforce their behavior.
- Consider obtaining a protective order against the stalker. Some states offer stalking protective orders and other victims may be eligible for protective orders under their state's domestic violence statutes.
- Trust your instincts. If you're somewhere that doesn't feel safe, either find ways to make it safer, or leave.

If in imminent danger, locate a safe place. Consider going to:

- Police Station
- Residences of family or friends (locations unknown to the perpetrators)
- Domestic violence shelters

- Place of worship
- Public areas (some stalkers may be less inclined toward violence or creating a disturbance in public places).

Safety at home:

- Identify escape routes out of your house. Teach them to your children.
- Install solid core doors with dead bolts. If all keys cannot be accounted for, change the locks and secure the spare keys. Fix any broken windows or doors.
- Have a code word you use with your children that tells them when they need to leave.
- Inform neighbors and, if residing in an apartment, any on-site managers about the situation, providing them with a photo or description of the stalker and any vehicles they may drive if known. Ask your neighbors to call the police if they see the stalker at your house. Agree on a signal you will use when you need them to call the police.
- Pack a bag with important items you'd need if you had to leave quickly. Put the bag in a safe place, or give it to a friend or relative you trust.
- Consider putting together a "safety kit" that includes the stalking log, a camera, information about the offender, etc. Safety kits are also available at North Dakota domestic violence programs. To locate a program nearest you visit www.ndcaws.org

Safety at work and school:

- Give a picture of the stalker to security and friends at work and school.
 - Tell your supervisors. They have a responsibility to keep you safe at work.
 - Ask a security guard to walk you to your car or to the bus.
 - If the stalker contacts you, save any voicemails, text messages, and e-mails.
 - Give the school or daycare center a copy of your protective order. Tell them not to release your children to anyone without talking to you first.
 - Make sure your children know to tell a teacher or administrator at school if they see the stalker.
 - Make sure that the school and work know not to give your address or phone number to anyone.
 - Keep a copy of your protective order at work.
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