

Stalking ~ How To Protect Yourself

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Stalking only occasionally becomes a focus of public awareness, but it takes place all the time. When stalking happens to you or someone close to you or you, it can have devastating consequences in your life. People often feel helpless when confronted with a stalker. They have a sense that they can do something, but aren't sure what it is. Our strongest recommendation is that anyone concerned with this subject also read Gavin de Becker's book, *The Gift of Fear*.

Police forces vary widely in their understanding of stalking and their ability to help protect an individual. This is rapidly improving in many areas. But, no matter how understanding police are, they can't put anyone under a 24-hour guard. The ultimate protection is what each individual can do for herself or himself.

If You Are Being Stalked

If you are ever stalked, it is not your fault. You are not responsible for what the stalker is thinking, feeling or doing. You may feel powerless, confused and isolated. Being stalked can take over your life. Fear can control your actions and take away your enjoyment of each day. It is vital to know that there is much you can do to greatly increase your safety. Break out of any isolation. Get support. Deny the stalker privacy and control. You can combat this.

Who Stalks?

Stalkers can be anyone, male or female. However, because most stalkers are men, this article uses masculine pronouns. This information applies to most kinds of stalking situations regardless of gender.

Most stalkers are not strangers. As with other types of predators, most stalkers are acquaintances. Many stalkers were previously in a close relationship with the target and will not let go. Others are neighbors, a friend of a friend, clients, and so on. A relentless pursuer can be thought of as "romantic" and many old stories and songs revolve around this theme.

Be aware that a man who persistently calls and follows you after you have told him to stop is dangerous. He

can't give up the power and control. Many inflate some slight contact into a full-blown romance. A minority of the time, a stalker is completely unknown to the target and make up the connection entirely. Some stalkers are not motivated by any of these twisted variations on human relationship, but rather are simply motivated by revenge. This type includes the person angry with some politician and the disgruntled ex-employee targeting his boss and other workers.

What to Do If You Are Being Stalked

As with any form of potential violence, an important first step is to cut through the denial. Do not deny this could be happening to you at all, or deny this person, who you thought you knew so well, could do something so horrible. A common form of denial is the idea that the stalker is harmless and his activity is just a minor irritation. If you are in a stalking situation, the person doing this is too often not harmless, but neither are you powerless. There are many steps you can take to increase your safety.

One of the most powerful protections against stalking is clear and direct boundary setting. If you know you are being stalked, or you think you might be, tell him once what you want, namely to go away and never contact you again. After that, sever contact completely. Do not speak to him on the phone or in person. Do not try to reason with him. Do not leave more messages on his phone telling him to stop phoning. Do not have large friends go over to "have a little chat". Any contact or communication, even if it is negative, keeps him attached. If you completely break contact, many stalkers will eventually give up.

Tell everyone that you are being stalked - friends, family, co-workers, your children's school, your regular grocery store - everyone. If possible, give them all a photo of the stalker. This closes a possible avenue of information or even physical access. Remember, most predators are "nice" at first. It is far too easy for someone like this to charm or trick your friends or neighbors into giving them information. He may pretend to be a long-lost friend, or a husband wanting to track down his children who he says you stole. Deny him privacy and control. If you tell friends and neighbors, you will have one more layer of protection.

Other precautions you can take:

- Record everything that happens - every phone call, contact or incident. Even if it seems unimportant, write it down. Report it to police. Ask for the file number and use it any time you phone them. If you want or need to take legal action later, having this report will help. You can file a report with the police without having them do anything with it right away.
- In some communities a special personal alarm is available that connects you to your local police. Ask a police officer or transition house worker about this.
- If a stalker gets your home phone number, don't change it. Put a answering machine on that line and keep all messages. Make a note of times when someone hung up without speaking. Give these to the police also. Get a second number, unlisted, for yourself and friends.
- If you are receiving harassing phone calls, ask your phone company about the *57 call trace service.
- At work, have co-workers screen all calls and visitors. Remove your name from the in/out board. Remove any personal information from your desk and computer.
- Ask all friends, neighbors, co-workers and family to report any contact with the stalker. Record these instances. Give this information to the police.

- Ask trusted neighbors to help watch your home.
- Don't accept any packages unless you ordered something.
- Get a cell-phone and keep it with you at all times. "With you" means on your belt or in a pocket, not just in your car or a nearby room. That also means when you are at home. The stalker may cut your phone lines. You want to be able to phone for help at any time of the day or night. Be aware that cell-phone calls can be listened to with a scanner. Digital phones are more secure.
- Find out what number you can dial to prevent your number from going to people with call display and use it.
- Break your old routines and predictable patterns. Leave the house and come home at irregular times.
- Consider moving. Yes, it's completely unfair, but depending on the situation, you may need to consider this option for your safety.
- It is crucial that you take part in a powerful and effective self-defense course.

Protect Yourself from Stalking

Protect your personal information. Your full name, phone number and home address are nobody's business except for trusted friends and family. Avoid putting this information on any public documents or official files. Get a mailbox that lets you use "Suite Number" instead of "Box Number." An address including "Suite Number" looks more like a home address. Don't put your first name. Use two initials. Why two? Because one initial too obviously indicates a woman. Using two initials is more commonly a male practice.

Send change of address cards with your new Suite Number to all organizations and individuals (except those few trusted friends and family members who already know). Make sure no records anywhere have your name and address on them. This means everything:

- driving license
- doctor's office
- car registration
- vet's office
- magazine subscriptions
- business cards
- mail order companies
- credit cards
- your children's school
- utilities
- sports activities
- any stores you use that keep personal records (video, dry-cleaners, photo-shop, pharmacy) and so on *everywhere*.

You may need to push in some cases, but you can actually get your address removed from public records. The police officer looking after your file may be able to help. This may sound like over-reacting, even crazy, but these really are just sensible precautions to take. These precautions will seem trivial compared to the hassle you will endure if you are stalked by a determined predator.

Protect your privacy when you are in public places too.

Just listen to other people when you are at the counter in a video store, bank or supermarket. Most people happily give their name, address and phone with several strangers within hearing range. It is a simple and horrible fact that picking up information like this is a common tactic of predators.

Never discard anything with your personal information on it. Burn it or double-shred it. Dumpster/trash-can diving is another tactic used by criminals to gain information. Assume your trash-can is being viewed by the public.

Dangerous Myths About Stalking

Myth: It'll be better for everyone if I let him down easy.

This is in fact, one of the worst things you can do. Don't try to sugar-coat your "No." Don't agree to see him "as a friend". You cannot reason with a stalker. Any way you try to be kind and soften the impact of what you are saying just invites him to stay.

If you say, "I don't want a relationship right now", he thinks he just needs to wait.

If you say, "I'm in a relationship right now", he thinks he just has to win you over, or perhaps that he has someone to get out of the way.

If you say, "I need to be by myself", he translates that to thinking that you'll be happy when you realize how much he loves you.

You must make a simple, blunt statement with no explanations, time limits or loopholes. Then sever contact - completely.

Myth: A Restraining Order will stop him.

Stalking victims are usually told to get a restraining order. These are only of limited usefulness. It can stop a "mild" stalker, someone who is still fairly rational and who cares about social or legal repercussions. However, about two-thirds of orders are violated. Do not make the mistake of thinking the predator will respond to a restraining order the way you would. This legal enforcement will do nothing to stop a stalker with a high degree of investment in the situation. This type can include former intimate partners, a more delusional stalker, or one motivated by revenge. In some cases, the situation can even be worsened by this legal tactic. It's too much like an insult to some men, and can precipitate a violent situation.

If you are considering asking for a restraining order, find out how they are enforced in your area. Is breaking the order a misdemeanor (i.e. equivalent to littering or jaywalking), or is it a felony (a serious criminal conviction)? What will police do if the order is violated? If the stalker just gets a warning or a "slap on the wrist," things have just become worse. He now thinks he is invulnerable, and he can do whatever he likes with no consequence to him. Talk to local domestic violence organizations and stalking victim support groups. Find out from them also how orders are enforced in practice. Put this information together with an estimate of the level of investment of the stalker and an estimate of the level of danger involved. Make an informed decision about the best way to go in your situation. In any case, far more powerful than a restraining order is making sure he cannot get to you, and making sure you can defend yourself if he does.

Myth: He hasn't threatened me, so I'm not in any danger.

The fact there has been no danger up until now does not mean it won't come. It's true some stalkers may warn their targets with obviously threatening statements such as, "We have to be together ... forever." or "If I can't have you, nobody can." However, even if he hasn't made such an overtly dangerous statement, any words or behaviors that indicate an unwillingness to let go of his obsession is a red flag to danger. Changing circumstances in the target's life or in the life of the predator could precipitate violent behavior. One example would be if the target becomes engaged. This could trigger deadly violence in the deluded creep who sees this as a betrayal of his imagined relationship with the target.

Also, just because a stalker doesn't have a criminal record does not mean he is not dangerous. Many infamous stalker/killers had committed no act of criminal violence before the murders they are known for. A past history of violence does indicate a higher possibility of future violence. The absence of a violent history, on the other hand, means nothing — every violent offender has to have a first time. Law enforcement personnel are becoming more educated in assessing these risks. Being stalked is itself a warning. Any stalking situation should be regarded as dangerous.

Summary:

- Take the situation seriously
- Deny information
- Deny access
- Sever contact completely
- Educate yourself
- Participate in a full force self-defense course

Again, read the excellent and important book *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker. This is simply a MUST for anyone who is the target of stalking.