

## **When he Crosses the Line...the Risks of Campus Stalking**

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He sends flowers (your favorite kind). He leaves love notes on your windshield and even drops off beautiful poems at your door. Some might say, "Isn't that romantic?" Others might say, "Aren't you lucky?" Still others might think 'I wonder how she does it; I never have any luck with men.' But the person who receives this attention is concerned, is confused, is worried, and is fearful.....because she didn't want any of this; she wishes he would leave her alone. She begins to change her normal pattern of behavior, taking different roads to and from work and school, buys extra locks for her home, and asks everyone she knows to let her know if they see 'him.'

How things have changed in the last 50 years! Many people still do not understand the phenomenon of stalking. They still ignore the threats to safety by saying things like, "Oh, don't worry. He means no harm." Or "He just doesn't have very good social skills. He'll stop bothering you soon, I'm sure. Just smile and be pleasant when you see him."

In actuality, the act of stalking is nothing at all to minimize. Even though all fifty states have passed anti-stalking laws in the past twenty five years, the incidents keep growing in number and in intensity. The most recent statistics show that 1 out of every 12 women and 1 out of every 45 men will be stalked at some time in their life. On college campuses, the rate goes up to 1 in 8 women and 80% of those knew their stalker. The primary targets of stalking are young women between the ages of 18 and 29 – the traditional college student age. 90% of stalkers are male, no matter whether the target is female or male.

So, what is stalking anyhow? Legal definitions vary from state to state but the common language in the best laws generally refers to harassing or threatening behavior that an individual engages in repeatedly (a course of conduct) which puts another person in reasonable fear of physical violence, sexual assault, and/or death. Fear is the fundamental justification for all stalking laws and the element of fear is the greatest weapon used by the stalker. Whether or not the stalker intends to cause fear is not important; it's the impact on the targeted person that counts!

Stalking was first understood to be unwanted following, unwanted telephone calls, unwanted gifts... but in this technologically-savvy time, it is rare that stalking does not include cyber/technology behaviors – unwanted IMs, texts and emails, unwanted postings on social networking sites, GPS tracking, impersonation, surveillance cameras, and more.

Even with laws that include cyber-stalking on the books, stalking is difficult behavior to recognize, define, and address. It is especially difficult on college campuses. Stalking may begin as bothersome behaviors. Minimizing incidents is common among stalking victims; they really don't want to get the poor guy into trouble for being socially inept, but what happens when he crosses the line!

Stalkers are often motivated by obsession and a desire to control, which stem from either a real or imagined relationship with the victim. Rejection after a relationship break-up

is one of the most common reasons that stalking begins – the feeling of ‘you can’t just leave me’ or ‘if I can’t have you, then nobody can.’ The stalker becomes intrusive and intimidating at first; then proceeds to persistent following, threats, and assaults that can lead to injury or death. Stalking can never be considered a normal or acceptable behavior when a relationship ends.

Early intervention is critical. Often when law enforcement or another campus authority speaks to the stalker, the behaviors disappear. Stalkers do not like it when authorities know what they are up to! Surveys show that only a small percentage of campus stalking incidents were reported to police, but the vast majority of stalking victims did confide in someone... a counselor, a friend, or a family member. Stalking cases can build to a nearly daily unwanted behavior. Persistence is the stalker’s key to create the greatest impact on his victim. And she begins to wonder what’s next? Where will I see him? Is there anything I can do to get him to stop?

Hopefully, the targeted victim will reach out to get needed support while she figures out the best path to take, whatever that might be. Yes, that’s right.... It’s her decision about what to do next. Stalkers don’t listen to reason. They have an agenda that doesn’t include the victim’s wishes!

So, how should the stalking victim deal with her stalker? Start by being aware of one’s own behavior and considering changes to be made. This is really essential, though totally unfair. If your safety is paramount, changing your routine may make all the difference. Think of this as typical problem-solving. Begin to gather information about your stalker, analyze the problems and the risk factors – this is threat assessment at its most necessary. Identify goals for yourself – change locks, notify neighbors, plan new driving routes to and from school and work, make a police report. Then explore strategies and resources, especially individuals who can help you in one way or another.

Safety planning empowers victims! It provides practical ways to decrease risks! It defuses the crisis and helps the victim regain lost control! Trusting your instincts is the key to getting out of a bad situation or perhaps never even getting into one! When he says he loves you so much that he needs to be with you every minute or that he needs to talk with you twenty times a day, you know right then and there that it is time to limit your accessibility to this obsessed person. Escaping harm means avoiding his suffocating advances and halting the progression of potential violence.

## **Resources at NOVA**

NOVA Police – 704.764.5000, 911 for emergencies

NOVA Sexual Assault Services (confidential program supporting victims of sexual assault, dating/partner violence, and stalking) – 703.338.0834 (24 hour cell) or [nova.sas@nvcc.edu](mailto:nova.sas@nvcc.edu)