

Protect Yourself from Stalkers

By NOVA Sexual Assault Services 2013

Stalking is one of the most insidious problems facing women and, to a lesser extent, men on campus and in society in general. Stalking refers to unwanted contact or attention by an individual which causes fear in another. Stalking is unwanted pursuit, following or harassment. To harass means to engage in a course of conduct directed at a specific person that causes substantial emotional distress. Stalkers, who may be male or female, use various and multiple means to stalk their victims. These means include numerous and unwanted telephone calls, texts or emails; finding notes on doors or windshields, “coincidental, chance” meetings on multiple occasions; and being physically followed or watched.

The odds are that almost one in ten women (and 1 in 50 males) will be stalked in their lifetime. Almost 60% of females are stalked by an intimate partner and of these, approximately 80% and 30% respectively are assaulted physically and sexually.

Often stalkers and their targets know each other; but sometimes they are strangers. Many stalking victims have early misgivings about the stalker prior to the onset of intrusive behaviors. This is the best time to address the problem. It is common, though, to minimize the behaviors at first because they aren't really illegal. Finding love notes on your desk or car is not illegal. Receiving flowers from someone is not illegal. But the conduct as a course of action is illegal and it is called stalking! Those targeted are often too afraid to identify the behavior as unwanted, especially when friends and family think that the incidents are ‘so thoughtful.’ Victims fear taking an early firm stand and possibly ‘hurt someone’s feelings.’ But that’s much better than risk being terrorized by that person in the future.

Targets or victims of stalking are traumatized and often feel helpless and out of control, as well as fear. Most stalking victims need support from an outside person. That can be a friend or family member, but often it is easier to reach out to a professional for advice and information. Here at NOVA, we have Sexual Assault Services (SAS) which assists our community with the issues of stalking, dating/partner violence, and sexual assault. The SAS phone is answered 24 hours a day. It is critical to reach out sooner rather than later to get the help you might need and to gain advice about making a police report.

Stalking is against the law! If you are in immediate danger, call 911. To make an official report, contact NOVA’s Police Department (703-764-5000). We can initiate criminal charges and assist you in getting a protective order.

If you are being stalked, here are several things you should do:

- Contact NOVA's Sexual Assault Services (SAS) (703-338-0834) for assistance and support. They are available 24 hours a day.
- Develop a safety plan. Find an alternative place to stay or have family and friends escort you to places. NOVA's police will escort you on campus.
- Do not respond to the stalker in any way. Stalkers gain from every communication.
- Hold on to evidence of stalking, such as emails, notes, voicemails, letters, and gifts.
- Do not delete texts or voice mails as they can be effective in the evidence chain.
- Keep a detailed record of the times and places stalking occurred and identify any witnesses. Your log can be used if criminal charges are placed on the stalker.

Stalking is a serious and dangerous crime. Be alert to your surroundings, trust your instincts, take all threats seriously and call NOVA's SAS and Police if you are a victim.