About Stalking

* Stalking is a crime of terror with a beginning, but seemingly no end. It's a crime of fear that leaves no physical cuts or bruises - at least not unless the stalker becomes desperate and acts out in violence, which is often the case.

* According to a 1993-94 U.S. Department of Justice study, women are the victims in 90 percent of the cases nationwide and 1 in 20 of them will be stalked sometime in their life. Thirty-eight percent of stalking victims are single women between 20 and 45 years old, but teens and older people can be targets too. More and more of them are being caught up in terrifying web of obsession, a terrifying pursuit of the victim.

* The difference between harassment and stalking is a distinction of the law. Stalking occurs when harassing behavior is repeated, is threatening, is purposefully directed at a specific person, and would cause a reasonable person to fear bodily injury or death for themselves or a family member.

* Sometimes, it's just surveillance; everyplace you go, he's there. Without a doubt it's emotional terrorism. The victim can't get away.

* There are telephone calls - 20 to 50 a day, notes on the windshield, or he's in the grocery store when she is, then shows up at an event 50 miles away.

* That's what's so frightening. How can this person know what your schedule is, where you're going? But they do. Stalkers may break into their victim's house, read their mail, listen to their answering machine or move things around, just to let them know they've been there.

* Many people think this could only happen to celebrities. In fact it was the California stalker murder of actress Rebecca Schaffer of the television series "My Sister Sam," that prompted the nation's first anti-stalking law in 1990.

* Celebrities Jodie Foster, David Letterman and Madonna have suffered from stalking. But studies show that more than 80 percent of victims are "ordinary" people.

* Stalkers fall into two categories of motivation according to forensic psychologists: love obsession and simple obsession. People who stalk celebrities fall into the first category.

* Although they have no relationship with their target, they are convinced that they can make the celebrity love them. When their victim doesn't "follow the script," they may use threats, intimidation or violence to make their obsession "come true." They can also become obsessed with a stranger or casual acquaintance.

* But most stalking targets, about 75 percent, have some previous personal relationship with the stalker. This is the simple obsession and can be the most dangerous.
This type stalker may or may not have a psychological disorder, but all have been found to have personality disorders, according to the FBI Center for Crime Analysis.

They are generally above average in intelligence, but are socially maladjusted, emotionally immature and suffer from feelings of powerlessness, jealousy and low self esteem, FBI studies show. They use their controlling relationship to feel more powerful.

The most common harassment/stalker cases dealt with are those of simple obsession: a relationship or marriage goes sour and the jilted person is unable to accept it.

The personality problems are what can make this type of stalker dangerous, especially if there is a history of domestic abuse.

The reason they are so dangerous is that they stalk out of anger, hurt and revenge. They may be looking for a way to justify their rage. The simple obsessive stalker is likely to develop the idea, "If I can't have her, then nobody else will.

Stalkers come from every soci-economic and educational background. There have been professional men found guilty of stalking, as well as laborers and men of middle incomes and educations. The common denominator is the fear they inspire.

That fear is often justified, especially if it comes at the end of a relationship. Statistically, most women homicide victims KNOW their perpetrator.

Stalking Defined

There are five main parts of most stalking statutes that must be met in order for law enforcement to treat a case as a stalking case. The elements of this crime include:

* A 'willful course of conduct'

* involving repeated or continuing harassment

* of another individual

* that would cause a reasonable person* to feel terrorized, frightened, intimidated, threatened, 'harassed' or molested

* and that actually causes the victim to feel terrorized, frightened, intimidated, threatened, harassed or molested.

Note: The idea of a reasonable person derives from British Law. It suggests a test that can be applied on the basis of an intelligent non-expert person, that is a reasonable person, being put in a position able to consider the evidence that might have been available at a place or time. The test becomes: what would a reasonable person do under these circumstances, given the evidence or being exposed to a particular situation.
Forms of Stalking

According to the anti-stalking laws, a person can be charged with stalking for willfully and repeatedly contacting another individual, without permission. Under these laws, assailants could be charged with stalking for repeatedly:

* Following or appearing within the sight of another.
* Approaching or confronting another individual in a public or private place.
* Appearing at the work place or residence of another.
* Entering or remaining on an individual's property.
* Contacting by telephone.
* Sending mail or electronic mail.

What To Do If...

Remember, you neither wanted nor deserved to be stalked. You are the victim, not the criminal. Suggestions of what to do if stalked are listed below. Every situation is different, so there are no set guidelines. Use your own judgment as to what actions to take.

* Make sure you have communicated a definite "NO" to the stalker, not just brushed them off. Then end all communication with them.

* Report to your local police department that you are a victim of stalking, whether or not you plan to file formal charges. If possible, you can ask the department (or better yet, get to know the officers on your beat) to increase patrols in your area. Be especially careful if the police suggest a restraining order, as this is a response to the stalker and you have no way of knowing who will and who won't obey the order (or who will be "set off" to escalate their attempts or violence in reaction).

* Make sure your friends, family and employer are aware of the situation. The more eyes watching your back, the safer you will be.

* Build your case against the stalker by providing the police with any or all of the following:
  
  o Documentation (personal journal or diary) of the stalker's activities.
  
  o Taped recording(s) of threatening telephone calls.
  
  o Videotape of stalker's actions.
o Basic identifying information (i.e. license plate number, make of car, personal appearance).

o List of contacts with the stalker (i.e. date, time, place, what was said, letters/calls received).

**Telephone Harassment**

Call the harassment division of the phone company. Tell them you are receiving threatening and harassing calls. They will send you some paper work to fill out and to ID the person and numbers they call from. In some places, they can internally put a device on your phone to track where they are calling from and how many times they call. It goes for all incoming calls. You have to keep track of them too. After 2 or 3 weeks or whenever they have enough to go with, they will turn it over to the police dept. and it goes from there. It can go to arrest and prosecution.

Another solution is to get a second line, but do not cancel the old phone number. It's better than changing your number because this way the unwanted caller believes they are still making contact. Tell the new phone number to those you'd like to hear from. Leave an answering machine on the old line, turn off the ringer, mute the machine, do not listen to the messages. Eventually the only person using the original line will be the unwanted caller. The tapes can either be used as evidence (have a FRIEND listen & log the messages; do not listen to them yourself) or thrown out regularly. Sure it costs a bit more to have two lines: but the expense may be well worth the piece of mind.

Something cheaper than a second line is called "ringmate" - you can add a second phone number onto your existing account and the new number will have it's own distinct ring so you know which number is being called!

Caller ID, combined with anonymous call blocking has been by far the best defense, although it is not full proof, and doesn't catch the calls from pay phones or some long distance, as long as you only pick up the calls you recognize.

There are some other options available from the phone company. One is called call block. It is a service through the phone company that lets you block several numbers for a flat fee per month. You can set and unset it up yourself. What's nice about this is, the phone will ring on the caller's end but you won't hear it ring on your end. It won't work if you have an answering machine. Another service is called call trace. To use this, you must register with the service and then dial a number after each harassing call. This will trace the number and it will be stored at the phone company. After a certain number of calls, you will be notified and asked if you want to press charges against the caller.

Note that, when someone calls you and just hangs up, that IS considered a harassing phone call and is a violation of both state and federal law. If done across state lines, it can land you up to 6 months in jail. So the calls don't have to be threatening or abusive to be
considered harassing. The downfall is, that each trace can cost up to a dollar. With 50-60 calls per day, it can get plenty expensive.

Also, call the phone company and have your address removed from the listing or list it only under your initials. Also consider a PO Box. It only costs about $35 a year. Small price for peace of mind.

If you are still communicating with your abuser on the phone, you may want to seriously consider getting an answering machine that allows you to record your conversations. In many states you need the other person's permission to record the call. Check the front of your phonebook to get this information. Then start the recording and say very clearly something along the lines of: "I want to inform you that from this point forward this conversation is being taped. If you continue talking to me, I will assume that you are giving me permission to tape this. Do you understand what I just said?" Of course, that may mean that he or she will simply hang up -- good!

Is it fair that you should have to pay all this to get this stopped? No. But be very thankful that these services exist. Before they existed, you would have absolutely no way to prove what was happening unless you could convince the phone company to put a trace on your line. Personally, I'd much rather pay this than deal with the ongoing harassment. It ultimately puts YOU in control of the situation instead of your abuser.

**Your Rights & Options**

Get an anti-stalking restraining order from your local circuit court (this order states that the stalker is to have no contact with the victim; if violated, criminal penalties will follow).

This will not only protect you, but also assist the police in enforcing the anti-stalking law. It also increases the penalties should the stalker violate the restraining order.

You may also bring a civil action against your stalker. This allows you to sue him or her for any damage they have done, your emotional harm and may entitle you to exemplary damages and legal fees as well.

As a victim, your best weapon against stalkers is the police. They are a means of protection as well as a source for referrals. However, it is also important to have support from your friends and/or family during this emotionally distressing event.

Parts excerpted from The Sioux City Journal Online Editorial: "Stalking Often Escalates from Terror to Violence" By Michele Linck.

And "A Citizen's Guide to Stalking" published by the Michigan's Women's Commission