

Helping Stalking Victims: 5 Basic First Steps

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In 2011 the Center for Disease Control reported, from a national household survey, that 1 in 4 women in Kentucky is stalked in her lifetime. Stalking was defined as experiencing a variety of unwanted and repeated tactics by the same perpetrator causing the victim to feel very fearful or to believe that they or someone close to them would be harmed or killed as a result of the perpetrator's behavior. The study reported Kentucky as having the highest rate of stalking in the nation.

Stalking is a pattern of behavior that is unpredictable, frightening, and dangerous. It is NOT accidental and it is not a crime of passion or too much love. Rather stalking is targeted violence. That means it is a systematic and deliberate set of tactics designed to control and intimidate the target much like a predator hunting its prey. Stalking is a crime in all 50 states.

The stalker might be someone the victim had a relationship with, or the stalker could be someone he or she doesn't know or has barely met. When the victim and the stalker are intimate or ex-intimate partners stalking often begins while the couple are still in the relationship although stalking can start after separation or even after a no-contact order has been issued.

While Kentucky leads the nation in rates of stalking, information about the criminal justice system response to this devastating crime suggests it is being taken even less serious than in previous years. Charges for stalking have steadily declined since 2004. Further, even when stalking is charged, charges are often dismissed outright.

In addition, working with stalking victims can be challenging and time consuming. This article describes five basic **STEPS** that every helping professional can take address with stalking victims, even when time is limited.

SEE STALKING. One simple question can open the discussion about stalking: "Is someone repeatedly following or watching you, showing up unexpectedly, or communicating with you in ways that seem obsessive or make you concerned for your safety?" Exploring the answer to this question and talking about these behaviors as stalking should help to give you and the victim the bigger picture of what is happening and how it is affecting the victim's life. Thus, the first step is to name what is happening, or to help the victims see and acknowledge the stalking-like behavior.

ASSESS THREAT. The second step is to clearly explain that stalking is a "red flag" for violence and psychological harm. Even when victims realize that what is happening to them is stalking-like behavior, they often downplay or minimize their level of risk.

**The 5 'STEPS'
for helping professionals**

**SEE STALKING.
ASSESS THREAT.
PRESERVE EVIDENCE.
PROMOTE PROTECTION.
SEEK SUPPORT.**

**Additional resources and
consulation is available
at www.OutrageUs.org.**

**OutrageUs.org is a
web-based Kentucky
nonprofit that features
multi-media resources,
tools, and research-
informed strategies to
help individuals and
communities address
stalking. The site can help
victims understand what
is happening to them
and what to do about
it. They can hear about
the experiences of other
stalking survivors through
mini-documentaries
featured on the site, and
learn about resources
specifically designed
for stalking victims and
survivors (see the green
folders at the bottom of
the home page).**

Stalking has harmful implications for victims' safety, mental health, financial security, housing, and for the safety of their children, other family members, and friends.

PRESERVE EVIDENCE. Stalking is one of the few crimes for which victims must often take an active role in their ongoing safety as well as in their own evidence collection to document the crime. Victims should document in a journal or in another organized way each incident including: dates, times, what happened, vehicle and license plate information, witnesses to the incident or people they talked to afterwards, and their feelings about what happened (e.g. fear, anxiety). Victims should also document how the stalking has affected them and any changes they made in their daily lives (e.g. relocated, changed jobs). Tell the victim to take photos when possible and to save any evidence. Have them print or take screen shots of postings, texts, emails, and other online contacts. Have witnesses write their version of the incident and ask if they would consider testifying or giving a statement if it becomes necessary. Also, victims should be told to obtain and keep copies of all police reports.

PROMOTE PROTECTION. Those being targeted by stalking must engage in active safety planning and understand that self-protection is crucial. The goal should be to make it as difficult as possible for the stalker. Throw every barrier in his or her way. Unfortunately, sometimes safety planning means making some lifestyle changes such as changing privacy settings on social media sites (such as Facebook and Twitter), screening calls, making changes around their living area to keep them safer (e.g., make sure there is good outside lighting, change locks, make sure you have a solid door, keep windows locked), obtaining a different cell phone number or getting an additional cell phone, altering their daily routine, avoiding going out alone and, in extreme cases, relocating. It is also important that victims are very clear with stalkers that they do not want any contact. Victims should document how they communicated their request for no contact and the stalkers' response to that request. Then victims need to avoid or diminish contact with the stalker as much as possible.

SEEK SUPPORT. It is crucial that those being targeted for stalking tell others, seek formal agency support, and persist in getting help. Telling others they trust (roommates, friends, family, professors, childcare, employers, neighbors, etc.) about the situation can provide needed emotional support and help them think through safety measures. It also means more people are on the lookout for the stalker if he or she comes around the victim's home, class, or work. Victims also need to make it clear that people should not provide information about them to the stalker, no matter how benign the request may seem. Victims should devise code words with friends, family, roommates, and co-workers if possible to signal when they need immediate help. You can help victims contact the campus registrar, residence life, workplace, utility companies, banks, and anyone else who maintains personal records on them to inform them of the situation and request that they keep the victims' information confidential. Victims may want to consider obtaining a post office box for their mail to keep their address confidential and to protect their privacy.

You and the victims may also want to consult www.OutrageUs.org. OutrageUs.org is a web-based Kentucky nonprofit that features multi-media resources, tools, and research-informed strategies to help individuals and communities address stalking. The site can help victims understand what is happening to them and what to do about it. They can hear about the experiences of other stalking survivors through mini-documentaries featured on the site, and learn about resources specifically designed for stalking victims and survivors (see the green folders at the bottom of the home page).

Each interaction with stalking victims can be an important step to increase victim safety and offender accountability. Every time you help victims put the pieces together and encourage them to take an active role in planning for their safety and building a case by documenting their experiences, they take away some of the stalkers' power. Communities must demonstrate to stalkers that they are no longer in charge. We all need to do our part to help victims reclaim their lives and take action to stop their stalkers.