

Technology & Stalking

January 2011 marks the eighth observance of National Stalking Awareness Month. Usually when people think of a stalker they conjure up images of a stranger lurking behind a bush or an obsessed fan hanging around a celebrity's home. But in reality 3 in 4 stalking victims know their offender in some capacity. Intimate partner stalking is the most common type of stalking and the most dangerous.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics report titled "Stalking Victimization in the United States," an estimated 3.4 million Americans have been victims of stalking, which is defined as a course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear. The report shows that technology only makes stalking easier. More than one in four stalking victims reported that some form of cyberstalking was used, such as email or instant messaging. Electronic monitoring of some kind was used to stalk one in 13 victims.

In this day and age where technology has become an everyday part of our lives it has also become more common for stalkers and abusers to misuse technology against their victims. Victims are being stalked via e-mail, instant messages, text messages, and also by using various social networking sites (i.e. Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, etc.). It seems everyone has a cell phone and they carry it with them wherever they go. This creates new opportunities to be tracked and monitored. Cell phones can be monitored or tracked via Global Positioning Systems (GPS) that use satellite receivers to provide precise real-time worldwide positioning, to locate and follow victims. Abusers also use Caller ID to monitor their partner's calls, or to find her after she has fled. They may monitor what websites are visited and check the computers history. Abusers also use software and hardware spyware programs which report all computer activity.

It is important for us to understand these technologies and also be aware of how technology can be misused. We need to become educated so we can increase our safety. If you are being threatened or harassed by unwanted messages, email, texts, voicemail, picture mail or other electronic media. Keep a log and write down as much information as you can. Messages in any form are evidence, so don't erase them, preserve them. Work with your local law enforcement to find out the best way to document the harassment.

Also never leave your cell phone unattended, lock your key pad to prevent others from downloading a GPS tracking program. Monitor your cell phone bill, if a tracking program was purchased from the carrier it should show up on your bill. Use per-call or permanent caller ID line blocking on your phone so your calls can not be monitored. Use a strong password on your computer that combines letters, numbers and symbols, and change it often. Avoid opening e-mail attachments and don't allow others access to your personal computer. By doing this you can prevent perpetrators from loading spyware software or hardware onto your computer.

Following these tips isn't always enough. Sometimes victims need to take more extreme measures to remain safe. This can include using a safer computer to perform Internet searches or send emails that you wouldn't want an abuser to intercept. They may need to create additional e-mail or instant messaging account on a safer computer. Though not always economical they may need to discontinue use of their cell phone and get a new phone under a different account. Victims can contact their local domestic violence program to learn about donation programs that provide new cell phones and/or prepaid phone cards to victims of abuse and stalking.

Using technology and the internet is a great way for victims and survivors to find and access valuable resources. But it can also put them in danger. We need to balance our use of technology with safety. For more information on technology safety contact your local domestic violence program.

Dana Mees is the Administrative & Technology Coordinator at the North Dakota Council on Abused Women's Services & the Coalition Against Sexual Assault in North Dakota (NDCAWS/CASAND). She provides technical assistance and training to member programs on technology safety.