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Stalking is a Form of Terrorism

Unfortunately, we have become all-too-familiar with the term terrorism, understanding that it is the calculated use (or threat) of violence to attain goals through intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear. While we tend to associate this word with works carried out by groups with a political or religious agenda that differs from those of our society, similar actions conducted by individuals in our own communities often go overlooked. This form of domestic terrorism is called stalking.

Accepting a general definition of terrorism as “the systematic use of terror as a means of coercion,” the similarities are clear. Stalking is repeated, unwanted contact leading to an actual or implied threat that causes a reasonable person to experience fear. According to crime victim professionals at the Justice Solutions website, stalkers use “violence and threats of violence to achieve through intimidation and force what they cannot achieve through legitimate and legal means” by attempting “to subjugate and oppress the innocent in their . . . quest for power and control.”

Stalking is more common than previously believed. Currently, 1 in 20 women and 1 in 40 men in this country are victims of stalking. Research conducted by the National Institute of Justice indicates that 1.4 million Americans are victims of stalking every year, representing 8% of women and 2% of men in this country. This month, the National Center for Victims of Crime is marking the 3rd National Stalking Awareness Month to focus national attention on this problem.

Stalking is an equal opportunity crime, affecting people of every age, race, socio-economic class, and geographical location. While every stalker is different, some information is known. One study found 94% of stalkers identified by female victims were men and 60% of stalkers identified by male victims were men. The majority of stalking cases (77% of females and 64% of males) involved someone the victim knew. The National Center for Victims of Crime found 81% of women stalked by a current or former intimate partner were also physically assaulted by that partner. Stalkers have harassed their victims in many ways: 61% made unwanted phone calls, 33% sent or left unwanted letters or items, 29% vandalized property, and 9% killed or threatened to kill a family pet. The longer the stalking goes on, the greater the likelihood that the violence will escalate. All cases begin with the stalker gathering information about the victim, and making repeated overtures by telephone, mail or internet. The unwanted contact becomes increasingly threatening, with extreme cases resulting in actual or attempted rape or murder. In fact, 76% of murdered women and 85% of women who were victims of attempted murder had been stalked by their intimate partners in the previous 12 months.

While this predatory behavior has a long history, in 1990 California became the first state to make stalking a crime. Unfortunately, even though stalking is now illegal in all 50 states, the punishment for this crime ranges from minor to severe. Although 28% of female victims and 10% of male victims obtained a protective (restraining) order, that order was violated in 69% of the women's cases and 81% of the men's. Further, 54% of the women killed and 46% of the women who were victims of attempted murder had reported the stalking to police prior to the final assault, according to the Stalking Resource Center.

Even when a stalking victim is not physically harmed, the impact of this behavior is great. Insomnia,

anxiety, severe depression, and an inability to function socially are frequent results. One study revealed that 26% of people who were stalked lost time from work, and 7% never returned to work, as a result of the being victimized. Counseling was obtained by 30% of the women and 20% of the men who were the object of a stalker, although the number of people who need counseling is probably much higher. And as many as 56% of the female stalking victims employed some form of self-protection, with 11% going so far as to relocate. Further, friends, family members, and co-workers of stalking victims often are at risk as well.

If you or anyone you know is being stalked, you can take action to stop the harassment before it escalates to violence. Recommendations include:

1. Get an unlisted /unpublished telephone and use caller ID.
2. Change your email address.
3. Use a post office box instead of your residence for mail.
4. Report all incidents to the police, and keep a file of all police reports.
5. Keep a log of all incidents. Be sure to include date, time, and location, description of encounter, what response was taken, and if there were any witnesses.
6. Keep all evidence, including email communications, unwanted gifts, and phone messages.
7. Obtain a restraining order.
8. Ask friends, neighbors, and relatives to write down any encounters they have with the stalker.
9. Add an alarm system to your home, install deadbolt locks, security bars, peepholes in doors, and exterior lighting.
10. Keep important documents in a security box at a bank, and keep an “escape” bag (with necessities for an overnight visit) at a friend’s house.
11. Keep a cell phone charged for use in case the phone wires are cut.

To obtain further information about stalking, contact the National Center for Victims of Crime Stalking Resource Center at 202-467-8700 (www.ncvc.org), Justice Solutions at 202-448-1710 (www.justicesolutions.org), the National Organization for Victim Assistance at 800-879-6682, or Antistalking web site at www.antistalking.com. The Central Connecticut Health District (www.ccthd.org) can provide information about this or other public health concerns, and can be reached at 860-721-2822.