

# Five STEPS to Helping Stalking Victims

In 2011 the Center for Disease Control reported that 1 in 6 women and 1 in 19 men will be stalked in his or her lifetime. Stalking can be defined as experiencing unwanted and repeated contact, intrusion, and/or surveillance which causes the target to feel very fearful or concerned for their safety or concerned for the safety of someone close to them.

Stalking is a pattern of behavior that can be unpredictable, frightening, and dangerous. It is NOT accidental and it is not a crime of passion or too much love. Stalking is a systematic, intentional, and deliberate set of tactics designed to maintain an unwanted relationship to control, intimidate, and/or destroy the target's life.

Stalking can be thought of much like a predator hunting its prey.

Often the stalker is someone the target knows or had a prior relationship with. However, in some cases the stalker is someone the victim doesn't know or has barely met. When the victim and the stalker are intimate or ex-intimate partners, stalking often begins during the

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relationship and continues after separation. Stalking can also start after a no-contact order has been issued.

While research shows that stalking is devastating for victims and costly to communities, when victims seek help for their situation is often minimized, denied or dismissed by friends and family as well as agencies that victims sometimes turn to for help.

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



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## SEE IT

The first step is to acknowledge what is happening. 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 will help you and the victim see the bigger picture of what is happening and how it is affecting the victim's life. Victims who recognized their situation as stalking were more likely to seek help.



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## THREAT

The second step is to clearly explain that stalking is a "red flag" for life sabotage, psychological harm and violence. Even when victims realize they are being stalked, they often downplay or minimize their level of risk. Stalking has harmful implications for victims' safety, mental health, financial security, housing, and for the safety of their children, other family members, and friends. The key for safety planning is to help identify the victim's unique vulnerability or risk.

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*"One of the most helpful things the police did was validate my experience. While this may sound like a small thing, you'd be surprised at how many people dismiss this kind of situation as him being 'love sick' OR think that I was exaggerating. It gave me permission to follow my intuition which was telling me this was a dangerous situation, but I didn't want to believe it. They also offered very specific advice about how to increase my safety."*

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## EVIDENCE

Stalking is a crime for which victims must often take an active role in their own evidence collection to document the crime.

- Document, in a journal or other organized way, each incident including: dates, times, what happened, vehicle and license plate information, and witnesses to the incident or people they talked to afterwards (and contact information for these witnesses).
- Victims can have witnesses write their version of the incident and ask if they would consider giving a statement to police if necessary.
- Taking photos when possible and saving any evidence may be important.
- Print or take screen shots of posts, texts, emails, and other online contacts, or ask police to download digital evidence.
- It may be helpful to obtain and keep copies of all police reports.



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## PROTECTION

Those being targeted by stalking must engage in active and ongoing safety planning by thinking through their specific fears or concerns and making a plan. The goal is to make it as difficult as possible for the stalker. Another consideration is to clearly let the stalker know that they should not contact, stalk or harass the victim (either directly or through others). Sometimes prosecutors or private attorneys can send a cease and desist letter to the stalker, to warn the stalker that further contact or harassment may result in legal action. Documenting when and how the stalker was notified and how the stalker responded to the request may be important in helping others see that the stalker is deliberately harassing the victim.



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## SUPPORT

It is crucial that those being targeted for stalking tell others, seek formal agency support, and persist in getting help. Telling trusted others (roommates, friends, family, professors, childcare, employers, neighbors, etc.) about the situation can provide needed emotional support and help with thinking 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 may also want to let others know not to give information about them to the stalker, no matter how benign the request may seem.

### Two main reasons to document

1. Documenting what is happening can help others understand the big picture of the situation rather than incidents. Preserving the evidence also helps others understand that the offender is engaging in a pattern of deliberate and intentional behavior.
2. Having documentation can help with safety planning by showing where the victim might be the most vulnerable.

For more information on documenting, please visit [www.coercivecontrol.com](http://www.coercivecontrol.com).

### Summary

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 stalker's 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.

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### CHECK OUT

- Stalking and Harassment Assessment and Risk Profile (SHARP) [www.StalkingRisk.com](http://www.StalkingRisk.com)
  - After either the victim, or someone on behalf of the victim, completes a brief assessment, two narrative reports are generated based on how the questions were answered.
- Stalking Resource Center [www.victimsofcrime.org/src](http://www.victimsofcrime.org/src)
- **www.OutrageUs.org**. OutrageUs.org is a web-based nonprofit that features multi-media resources, tools, and research-informed strategies to help individuals and communities address stalking.
- [www.CoerciveControl.com](http://www.CoerciveControl.com) for more information about stalking and documenting stalking.