

Stalking: What Is It?

Idaho Penal Code (18-7905) defines stalking as “Any person who willfully, maliciously and repeatedly follows or harasses another person or member of that person’s immediate family.”

The term ‘stalking’ is commonly used to describe specific kinds of behavior, directed at a particular person, that are harassing or threatening. The variety of specific strategies employed and behaviors displayed by stalkers are limited only by the creativity and ingenuity of the stalkers themselves. Suffice it to say, virtually any unwanted contact between a stalker and his/her victim which directly or indirectly communicates a threat or places the victim in fear can generally be referred to as stalking. Examples include:

- ✓ Following
- ✓ Driving by or parking in front of house
- ✓ Showing up at work or home uninvited
- ✓ Unwanted phone calls
- ✓ Unwanted gifts, letters
- ✓ Vandalism, destruction of personal property
- ✓ Spying
- ✓ Leaving messages at home, work, and/or on car
- ✓ Talking to and enlisting support from friends and family members

Unfortunately, *there is no single profile for stalkers. In fact, many experts believe that every stalker is different*, making it very difficult not only to categorize their behavior, but doubly difficult to devise effective strategies to cope with such behavior. Forensic psychologists, who study criminal behavior, are just beginning to examine the minds and motives of stalkers. These psychologists have identified two very broad categories of stalkers and stalking behavior—**love obsession** and **simple obsession**.¹

Love obsession stalkers are people who develop a love obsession or fixation on another person with whom they have no personal relationship. The target may be only a casual acquaintance or even a complete stranger (often a celebrity or other well-known person). This category represents about 20-25% of all stalking cases. **Love obsession** stalkers not only attempt to live out their fantasies, but expect their victims to play their assigned roles. They believe they can make the object of their affection love them. They desperately want to establish a positive personal relationship with their victims. When the victim refuses to follow the script or doesn’t respond as the stalker hopes, he/she may attempt to force the victim to comply by use of threats or intimidation.

Simple obsession stalkers, the second category, represent 70-80% of all stalking cases and are distinguished by the fact that some previous personal or romantic relationship existed between the stalker and the victim before the stalking began. These are commonly referred to as *fatal attraction* cases. With **simple obsession** stalkers, the victim becomes the stalker’s primary source of self-esteem and his/her greatest fear becomes the loss of this person. It is exactly this dynamic that makes **simple obsession** stalkers so dangerous. In the most acute cases, stalkers will literally stop at nothing to regain their *lost possession* and in doing so regain their lost self-esteem.

“...stalking of regular citizens is an epidemic affecting hundreds of thousands every year.”

The Gift of Fear
Gavin De Becker, pg. 22

“...at least half of the women who end abusive relationships are later followed, harassed, or threatened by their abusers.”

The Domestic Violence Sourcebook
Dawn Bradley Berry, pg. 160

¹ National Center for Victims of Crime. Tel. 202/467-8700. www.ncvc.org/

Stalking behavior patterns closely mirror those common in many domestic violence cases. The pattern is usually triggered when the stalker's advances toward his/her victim are frustrated—regardless of whether the stalker is seeking to establish a personal relationship or continue a previously established relationship contrary to the wishes of the victim.

The stalker may attempt to woo the victim into a relationship by sending flowers, candy, and love letters in an attempt to prove his/her love. However, when the victim spurns the unwelcome advances, the stalker often turns to intimidation. Such attempts at intimidation often begin in the form of an unjustified, jealous, and inappropriate intrusion into the victim's life. Often these contacts become more numerous and intrusive over time, until such collective conduct becomes a persistent pattern of harassment. Many times, harassing behavior escalates to threatening behavior. Such threats may be direct or indirect and communicated explicitly or implicitly by the stalker's conduct.

Stalkers, unable to establish or re-establish a relationship of power and control over the victims, may turn to violence. In some cases, offenders are even willing to kill their victims and themselves in a last, desperate attempt to assert their domination over the victim. The evolution of the stalker's thought pattern progresses from, "If I can just prove to you how much I love you," to "I can make you love me," to "If I can't have you, nobody else will!"

While this progression in behavior is common, no stalking case is completely predictable. Some never progress beyond stage one. Some stalkers jump from the first to the last stage with little warning. Still others regress to previous stages before advancing to the next. It is not uncommon to see stalkers intersperse episodes of threats and violence with flowers and love letters.

Responding to a Stalker You Know

As previously mentioned, stalking involves unwanted pursuit, usually by someone the victim knows, often by someone the victim has been in a relationship with. Unfortunately confusion exists in American culture as to whether or not unwanted *romantic* pursuit is acceptable. Men are taught to pursue until they win over the object of their affections. Women are taught to let an unwanted pursuer *down easy*. Contrary to this pattern, it is very important for women who are being stalked to communicate as clearly as possible that they want the relationship to end.

- ✓ Don't explain why ("It's just that I don't want to be in relationship right now.").
- ✓ Don't include conditions (these turn into discussions).
- ✓ Don't negotiate (one more date to say goodbye).
- ✓ Don't say it more than once (every conversation is contact the stalker wants).

*"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,'
and your 'No,' 'No';..."*
Matthew 5:37a

Any response, negotiation, explanation, or contact reinforces the stalker's behavior. The clear, explicit rejection, "I don't want to be in relationship with you," needs to be reinforced by a refusal to engage the stalker.

Additional Resources

The Gift of Fear, Gavin De Becker.

The Domestic Violence Sourcebook, Dawn Bradley Berry.

He Promised He'd Stop, Michael Groetsch.

A Safe Place Ministries Quick Look—Stalking Safety Planning.

www.safeplaceministries.com/