

Family Shelter Service

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CYBERSTALKING

August 1999 Report from the Attorney General to the Vice President

What Is Cyberstalking?

Although there is no universally accepted definition of cyberstalking, the term is used to refer to the use of the Internet, e-mail, or other electronic communications devices to stalk another person. Stalking generally involves harassing or threatening behavior that an individual engages in repeatedly, such as following a person, appearing at a person's home or place of business, making harassing phone calls, leaving written messages or objects, or vandalizing a person's property. Most stalking laws require that the perpetrator make a credible threat of violence against the victim; others include threats against the victim's immediate family; and still others require only that the alleged stalker's course of conduct constitute an implied threat. While some conduct involving annoying or menacing behavior might fall short of illegal stalking, such behavior may be a prelude to stalking and violence and should be treated seriously.

Offline vs. Online Stalking -- A Comparison

MAJOR SIMILARITIES

MAJOR DIFFERENCES

Majority of cases involve stalking by former intimates, although stranger stalking occurs in the real world and in cyberspace.	Cyberstalkers may be located across the street or across the country.
Most victims are women; most stalkers are men.	Electronic communications technologies make it much easier for a cyberstalker to encourage third parties to harass and/or threaten a victim (e.g., impersonating the victim and posting inflammatory messages to bulletin boards and in chat rooms, causing viewers of that message to send threatening messages back to the victim "author.")
Stalkers are generally motivated by the desire to control the victim.	Electronic communications technologies also lower the barriers to harassment and threats; a cyberstalker does not need to physically confront the victim.

What To Do If You Are Being Cyberstalked

- * If you are receiving unwanted contact, make clear to that person that you do not want them to contact you again.
- * Save all communications for evidence. Do not edit or alter them in any way. Also, keep a record of your contacts with Internet system administrators or law enforcement officials.
- * You may want to consider blocking or filtering messages from the harasser. Many e-mail programs such as Eudora and Microsoft Outlook have a filter feature, and software can be easily obtained that will automatically delete e-mails from a particular e-mail address or that contain offensive words. Chat room contact can be blocked as well. Although formats differ, a common chat room command to block someone would be to type: /ignore <person's screen name> (without the brackets). However, in some circumstances (such as threats of violence), it may be more appropriate to save the information and contact law enforcement authorities.
- * If harassment continues after you have asked the person to stop, contact the harasser's Internet Service Provider (ISP). Most ISP's have clear policies prohibiting the use of their services to abuse another person. Often, an ISP can try to stop the conduct by direct contact with the stalker or by closing their account. If you receive abusive e-mails, identify the domain (after the "@" sign) and contact that ISP. Most ISP's have an e-mail address such as abuse@(domain name) or postmaster@(domain name) that can be used for complaints. If the ISP has a website, visit it for information on how to file a complaint.
- * Contact your local police department and inform them of the situation in as much detail as possible. In appropriate cases, they may refer the matter to state or federal authorities. If you are afraid of taking action, there are resources available to help you, contact The National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-SAFE (phone); 800-787-3224 (TDD)