

How To Avoid Being Stalked in Cyberspace (and What To Do If You Are)



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Cyberstalking is a serious crime. A cyberstalker is someone who uses the Internet, email, or other electronic communications devices to repeatedly threaten and harass another person. Cyberstalking is similar to physical stalking in that most victims are women and most stalkers are men, the person being stalked usually knows the stalker, and the stalker's motivation is to exert control over the victim.

Cyberstalking is different in that the stalker and victim can be located in different geographic areas, the stalker generally relies on the Internet to send harassing or threatening communications, and the stalker can easily encourage other Internet users to harass and threaten the victim by posing as the victim in chatrooms or posting inflammatory messages on Internet bulletin boards.

Like physical stalking, cyberstalking can lead to physical violence. Victims suffer psychological trauma, often resulting in anxiety, depression, insomnia, and even loss of employment. The lack of direct contact between the cyberstalker and the victim can make it difficult for law enforcement to find and arrest the offender.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS TO PREVENT CYBERSTALKING:

- Make a list of safe sites (those sites that adopt an anti-harassment policy and follow through with it). Only visit those sites.
- Never give out any personal information about yourself to strangers in emails and chatrooms or on Internet bulletin boards.
- When you are online, only type things you would actually say to someone face to face. Think about how what you say might be interpreted without the context of body language and voice.
- Make sure that your screen name is neutral; never use your real name, nickname, or any type of "suggestive" name.
- Be very cautious about meeting an online acquaintance in person. If you choose to do so, always take someone with you and meet in a public place.
- If you experience contact with someone that is unpleasant or hostile, log off immediately. Report the incident to your Internet Service Provider (ISP). Most chat/bulletin boards also have a reporting system for unpleasant encounters.

HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO IF YOU ARE BEING CYBERSTALKED:

- If you are under 18, immediately talk to your parents or an adult you can trust about the situation. You may be in physical danger.
- If your email program has filtering capabilities, use them to block or filter email from the stalker. Sometimes you can block chatroom contact as well.
- Inform your ISP of the situation and request a new log-on name and password. If your ISP is not responsive, get a new account.
- Keep a log of all communications from the stalker. Make copies of every email, and do not alter them in any way. This is your only evidence.
- Make it absolutely clear to the stalker that you would like him or her not to contact you again.
- If the harassment does not stop, contact your local police department and tell them the situation.

For more information, contact the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC). You can call the Victim Assistance Hotline at 800-FYI-CALL Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. EST, or send an email to gethelp@ncvc.org. Visit NCVC's Stalking Resource Center at www.ncvc.org/src/.



National Crime Prevention Council
1009 Connecticut Avenue, NW • 13th Floor • Washington, DC 20036 • www.ncpc.org