

THE MYTHS & REALITIES OF STALKING



National Stalking Awareness Week 2018 is a call for statutory and voluntary agencies to commit to making stalking a priority. We want to increase reporting levels of stalking and ensure that professionals understand what stalking is and the behaviours associated with that.

Below are some of the misconceptions around stalking that we commonly hear:

Stalking isn't a crime

Stalking is a crime in England and Wales under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, in Scotland under the Criminal Justice and Licensing Act 2010, and is dealt with in Northern Ireland under the Protection from Harassment Order (NI) 1997. Stalking is described as a pattern of unwanted and persistent behaviour that is motivated by a fixation or obsession that causes a victim to suffer alarm, distress or a fear of violence. The law in England & Wales and Scotland states that it's illegal for a person to pursue a course of conduct that they know or ought to know amounts to stalking. A course of conduct refers to two or more incidents of unwanted behaviour. Stalking isn't characterised by particular behaviours, but rather by the motivation and impact of the course of conduct.

Stalking and harassment are the same

Whilst harassment can include some of the same behaviours as stalking and causes a victim fear and distress, stalking differentiated by the motivation of the stalker. If a stalker's behaviour shows a fixation or obsession (which may include unwanted behaviours such as following you, turning up at your work, making vexatious complaints about you, or continuously contacting you) and this behaviour is causing you alarm and distress then this meets the definition of stalking.

If your stalker doesn't threaten you then they aren't a danger

Just because your stalker hasn't threatened you does not mean that you are not at risk from them. Assessing risk in stalking situations is complex and risk can dramatically escalate at any time. Risk is not solely defined as risk of physical violence – although this can be a very real danger in stalking cases. Stalking also causes psychological trauma to victims, and the risk of this should not be underestimated. Recording all incidents may help you to see if the stalker's behaviour has changed and whether the situation has escalated. Please contact the National Stalking Helpline for specialist advice around risk and ways of minimising it. We would advise victims of stalking to remain vigilant and report all incidents to the police.



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Stalking usually stops by itself over time

Some stalkers may stop their behaviour over time, and some may stop after there has been legal intervention. However, the National Stalking Helpline has spoken to many victims whose stalkers have continued their behaviours despite receiving police warnings, civil injunctions, and sanctions from the criminal courts, including cases where stalkers have continued their behaviour from prison. There is no guarantee that a stalker will stop their behaviour so it is important that victims receive specialist support in robust safety planning.

If you're a public figure, then stalking just comes with the territory. In fact, you know you've made it when you've got a stalker.

Everyone has the right to live life free from fear and to feel safe. Stalking someone is never ok and should never be normalised. All victims of stalking should receive the same support from police and other support services regardless of their prominence.

All stalkers are male and all victims are female

In 2016/17 67% of callers to the National Stalking Helpline were female victims with male stalkers, but 23% were male victims (around a quarter of whom had a male stalker), and 26% of callers (of any gender) had female stalkers. It is important to note that anyone can be a victim, and victims should receive the same standard of support regardless of what gender they identify as.

Deleting your social media accounts will keep you safe; and if you don't then you can't complain

Stalkers can use social media to monitor or contact their victims as well as using other methods. Closing social media accounts does not necessarily keep victims safe, and support services should undertake robust safety planning with victims to look at how they can holistically address the risks perpetrators pose. The National Stalking Helpline often hears that when one route of monitoring or contact is removed, then a stalker will find another method – so simply deleting accounts does not always ensure safety.

'Attractive' people are most likely to be stalking victims

Anyone can be a victim of stalking and not only someone who is considered 'attractive'. It is important to note that stalkers don't only stalk someone they are attracted to and there are different stalker typologies. Stalking should never be considered the fault of the victim or a consequence of their looks or occupation.



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If a stalker believes that they hold a certain level of intimacy with the victim we should believe them

It is important to note that a stalker's motivation is to get close to their victim. They may persuade people close to the victim that they have or have had a relationship with the victim in order to gain their trust or make them complicit in the stalking. This may not be the case or their relationship with the victim may be exaggerated. The important thing to note is that the focus should not be the perceived relationship the stalker has with the victim (although this can be important in risk assessment), but on the behaviours the stalker is carrying out and the effect that this is having on the victim.

Stalkers only target celebrities and strangers

More than 90% of those who contacted us last year knew their stalker. Many domestic violence abusers go on to stalk their ex-partner once the relationship is over. The National Stalking Helpline also receives calls from victims who are being stalked by acquaintances, colleagues or ex-colleagues, neighbours, and strangers. Anyone can be a victim of stalking and it is important that we don't make assumptions about stalkers.

It is not stalking if you are in a relationship

If your partner's behaviour is fixated or obsessive, and their behaviour forms a course of conduct which causes you fear, distress or alarm, this meets the definition of stalking regardless of your relationship. However, many stalking behaviours that take place in a relationship are methods of coercive control. It may also be difficult to pursue a criminal charge of stalking regarding behaviours during a relationship due to the need to show that behaviours are unwanted. We would advise victims of stalking to keep a diary of all incidents, seek support from their local domestic abuse or specialist stalking service and report to police.

If you ignore a stalker, they will stop stalking you

Stalking stems from a fixation and / or obsession that one person has over another, so ignoring a stalker is not a guarantee that they will stop their behaviour. However, for safety reasons, we usually recommend victims cease all contact with their stalker and do not respond to them. If you feel that you are a victim of stalking, we would advise you seek support from the police and contact the National Stalking Helpline for tailored safety advice.

The stalker is not handling the breakup well.

This is a common excuse used by perpetrators of stalking and others who attempt to justify stalking behaviour. Persistent unwanted contact is not acceptable and no one should feel in fear.



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The stalker loves you.

There is nothing loving about making someone distressed or fear for their safety.

A non-molestation order, Police Information Notice (PIN) or restraining order will stop a stalker.

These interventions can deter some stalkers; however, others may continue their behaviour. Police Information Notices hold no legal weight and a stalker is not breaching any law if they continue their behaviour after receiving it. We would advise victims to stay vigilant and report all incidents. We would also advise support services to complete robust safety planning with victims and not solely rely on orders or PINs.

The stalker doesn't have a criminal record, so there is no real danger.

If a stalker has a history of violence this may increase the chances of you being physically harmed. However, no history of violence is not a guarantee that a stalker won't become violent or that they haven't been violent in the past, it may just be that the victim did not report to the police. In addition, physical violence is not the only risk from being stalked and many victims experience enduring psychological distress, with 50% developing PTSD. If you are entering a new relationship and you have concerns about the criminal history of your new partner you may wish to find out about how Clare's Law can help – you can find details of this on your local police force website or seek advice from a local domestic abuse service.

If you reason with or meet the stalker, they will stop their behaviour and leave you alone

Stalking is neither reasonable nor rational. Reasoning with a stalker is not likely to work. You should never agree to meet with or contact a stalker, and it can be dangerous. We would advise that victims cease all contact if it is safe to do so and seek support from the police and specialist services.

Stalkers are weird and lonely with limited social skills and lurk in the shadows

There is no stalker type - The National Stalking Helpline hears from victims whose stalkers come from different socio-economic groups, professions, educational levels, nationalities, ethnic backgrounds and religious groups. The only common feature stalkers have is their fixation and obsession on their victim.



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