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Even in Lamorinda's Bucolic Towns, Stalking Happens ... and It's a Crime

By Laurie Snyder



Image provided courtesy of the Stalking Resource Center of the National Center for Victims of Crime.

those can occur in a single day. In extremely serious cases, it's ongoing. "Stalkers are intelligent - possibly more so than average individuals because they hunt their prey and often use technology to do so. Many have suffered some type of loss - death or divorce. And they're very controlling. Trying to attain this person who doesn't want to be with them is a large act of control."

"While we have had cases of stalking here in Lafayette, most of those have been relationship based events - someone just cannot get over a part of their relationship," observes Lafayette Police Chief Eric Christensen. But when cases do happen, he says he and his officers take those cases very seriously. "Today's stalker hacks your email, forwards your phone calls and GPS tracks your car - that's why they are so dangerous." Orinda Police Chief Mark Nagel agrees, observing that more and more people appear to be using smartphones to spy on their spouses. "There are numerous apps that can reveal another person's location, and the victims aren't even aware it's happening."

According to "The Toll of Stalking: The Relationship Between Features of Stalking and Psychopathology of Victims," those receiving the unwanted and unprovoked attention frequently report increased anxiety, excessive tiredness or weakness, chronic sleep issues, headaches, appetite disruption or persistent nausea. In 1997, before researchers had seriously begun studying stalking's impact, at least one quarter of victims said they had attempted or seriously considered suicide.

"The victims often do have a real sense of danger and fear. They feel there's no safe place because their stalkers are showing up, calling, texting - putting surveillance in their homes," explains Piersig. Some use "teddy bear cams" - cameras inserted in a seemingly sweet gift to a child - placed there by one parent stalking another. "It's the unpredictability - never being sure when a stalker will show up. Many victims are genuinely afraid they'll be killed." Stalking may start out benignly, but it can escalate over time and cause such trauma that many victims develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

The difference with this form of PTSD, though, is that the battlefield is located not on foreign soil, but right next door. Arrested for assaulting a woman, one Lamorindan returned to the crime

"Anytime anyone is harassing and unwantedly giving you attention," says Rachel Piersig, "that's a huge warning sign." Piersig would know. She heads the Domestic Violence Unit for the Contra Costa County District Attorney's Office, and has sent many, many stalkers and batterers to jail during her legal career.

"Stalking is a pattern of harassing behavior with a credible threat toward a victim," explains Piersig. "The credible threat can be outright - with the perpetrator threatening to kill the victim or trying to drag her off - or it can be implied, making the victim fearful." In each case, police look closely at what's being said and done. Unwanted gifts, nude drawings made by the stalker of his victim, or poetry with unsettling sexual content become evidence because it makes women reasonably afraid that they'll be raped by the perpetrators.

The pattern can be short - two or more incidents documented under California law - but

scene after being bailed out of jail. He attacked his victim again, this time pulling her head backwards by her hair - repeatedly - while he had her on the floor on her stomach. Pretending she was dead until he finally left, she somehow managed to grab her small child and make it to a neighbor's home for help. Surgery was required to repair the victim's broken vertebrae.

According to The National Center for Victims of Crime, one in six women and one in 19 men will become stalking victims in their lifetimes. Jimmy Lee, spokesperson for the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office, reports that seven county cases occurred in 2014 - six in the sheriff's office jurisdiction and one in Oakley. "All of the reports had stated that at some time or another domestic violence was an issue and that all of these victims had restraining orders against the suspects."

Piersig suspects the crime of stalking may be underreported because victims are either minimizing the events or are afraid to tell anyone.

"Domestic violence and stalking are not limited to the four walls of the houses where it's happening. It might not be occurring in your relationship, but you might be there when someone comes hunting," says Piersig, who strongly urges victims, their neighbors and family members to seek help. "You don't have to be in a stalking or domestic violence relationship to be a domestic violence or stalking victim. It spills out into the community."

January is National Stalking Awareness Month

Is someone:

Following you and showing up at your home, school, work, or where you're socializing?

Sending unwanted gifts, letters, cards or emails?

Going through your garbage, using online public records search services, hiring investigators, or contacting friends, family, neighbors or co-workers to obtain more information about you?

Monitoring your phone calls or computer use, or using hidden cameras, global positioning systems (GPS) or other technology to track where you go?

Posting information or spreading rumors about you on the Internet, in a public place or by word of mouth?

Damaging your home, car or other property?

Threatening to hurt you, your family, friends or pets?

Committing other actions that control, track or frighten you?

If you are experiencing stalking or domestic violence, you are not to blame. Get help by calling your local police department or the confidential hotline at STAND! For Families Free of Violence: (888) 215-5555. Source: Stalking Resource Center, The National Center for Victims of Crime: <http://stalkingawarenessmonth.org/about>.

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