

Stalking and the Crime of Criminal Harassment

Victim Impact

The impact on victims of being stalked can range from slightly annoying, which is uncommon if the stalking lasts for any length of time, to wide-ranging, severe and life-altering. Many victims talk about the strain of perpetually being on alert - for the stalker and the next incident. They feel vulnerable and out of control as a result of being forced to live in a constant and overwhelming state of fear and anxiety. Stalking affects every aspect of a victim's life.

Psychological

Psychological responses to stalking include not just fear, but feeling stress, anxiety, paranoia, low self-esteem, rage, depression and, in some cases, post-traumatic stress disorder. Almost always, there is a pervasive sense of loss of personal safety and an accompanying state of hyper-vigilance. Stalking creates a psychological prison that deprives its victims of the basic liberties of movement and security.

Relationships

Victims become irritable, impatient, edgy and angry. Their change in mood and attitude may seriously and negatively affect their relationships with others, from casual acquaintances and coworkers to family and intimate partners.

Cognitive

Dealing with stalking can consume all their time and energy. It impacts their daily cognitive abilities as preoccupation leads to difficulty concentrating and remembering.

Physical

They may suffer from insomnia, nightmares, and other disrupted sleep patterns, eating disorders or a significant change in eating habits. Stalking victimization may also trigger a wide variety of behavioural reactions and significant disruptions of everyday life.

Behavioural

Many victims take steps to avoid being followed and spied upon. They alter their normal routines, avoid going out alone, steer clear of familiar places and, in some cases, certain people, and give up leisure, sports and/or social activities. To protect themselves, they screen telephone calls and change their telephone numbers, email addresses, driver's license, social insurance number, etc. They may lose time at work or never return to work.

Life-altering

More drastic action may include temporary or permanent relocation. This may involve uprooting children, leaving behind close friends and relatives and abandoning careers. In their attempts to protect themselves and their families, victims often find themselves isolated from the support networks they need so desperately. Over time, many stalking victims experience a total loss of trust, a sense of helplessness and long-term distress.

Even if the stalker loses interest, the victim can never be quite sure. Flashbacks, disturbing thoughts and memories will remain a part of the stalking victim's life – it is a lifetime ordeal.

Victim Impact - Making Matters Worse

There are certain factors that can make the impact of stalking worse for victims. On the other hand, the absence of these factors is likely to lessen the suffering that stalking victims experience.

Each new incident

Victims' reactions tend to worsen with each new incident. Previous victimization affects how individuals cope with new trauma – in effect, repeated victimization interrupts the normal healing process. By its very nature, stalking involves repeated contacts and communications that instill fear in the victim. As a result, each new incident of stalking interferes with the victim's ability to cope with the past trauma caused by being stalked. Stalking has a cumulative impact on victims, with each incident compounding all previous incidents and eliciting ever-increasing effects. In a sense the whole – all the incidents of stalking put together – is greater than the sum of its parts. If for no other reason than to decrease the number of incidents a stalking victim experiences, early intervention is extremely important.

Concerns for children or others

For many victims, the impact of being stalked is compounded by the concerns they have for their children and other loved one. Victims worry that their stalker, in attempting to “get at” them, may target their family and friends. This concern is especially distressing for parents worried for their children's safety and emotional wellbeing. Even if not targeted, family members, friends, coworkers and acquaintances may witness actual incidents of stalking, or the after effects in terms of the impact that victims experience and thereby be impacted themselves. Family members may be affected financially when victims miss work or security measures or acts of vandalism result in extra expenses. The activities of children and other family members may be altered when certain activities and places are avoided. Coworkers may find themselves covering for victims who are absent from work or not as focused as they once were. In essence, many of the people close to the primary victim become secondary stalking victims. In addition to concern, this results in stalking victims experiencing a great deal of guilt, as they blame themselves and take responsibility for how others are affected by the stalker's

actions. They often put a great deal of time and energy into protecting and consoling those around them, often at the expense of their own self-care.

Not being taken seriously

The reaction experienced by the stalking victim from others can range from disbelief, to apathy, to blaming, to believing but not wanting to get involved, to taking the victim's concerns seriously and offering support and assistance. Stalking is complex. Reactions and responses that do not acknowledge its seriousness are born out of a lack of knowledge and/or understanding. Too often victims are assessed as overreacting and not in any real danger. They may be judged for how well they are coping or what type of relationship they once had with the stalker. Some may even see stalking as a form of flattery or question victims as to what they did or are doing to encourage their stalker. Because of these perceptions, stalking victims are often left without the supports, services and protection they need. They may feel very isolated and begin to second-guess their own perception of what is happening to them. Many stalking victims spend an inordinate amount of time attempting to convince others that they are being stalked and that they are in danger. Stalking victims need their experience and their response validated as normal reactions to a very abnormal situation. They also need the risk they face, and their need for protection, to be taken very seriously.

Expectations after involving the justice system

Often it takes victims a considerable amount of time before they involve the criminal justice system. They have usually done everything they can possibly do - everything within their power - to deter the stalker before seeking outside help. Once they go to the police, and get hooked up with a victim advocate, they may experience a huge sense of relief that is fuelled by unrealistic expectations. After all, the criminal justice system is supposed to protect them, stop the harassment and make perpetrators accountable. When the stalking continues and they realize that the justice system may not be able to protect them, at least not immediately and not all the time, they feel helpless to end their nightmarish ordeal. The higher the victim's expectation is, the more severe their sense of frustration and despair will be. This is why it is so important that service providers paint a realistic picture and not raise any false hopes or unrealistic expectations.

Support provider's frustration and/or loss of interest

Too often service providers – advocates, counsellors, police officers, etc. – get frustrated when their best efforts do little to stop, or even slow down, the stalker or relieve the victim's fears and anxiety. Stalkers are very good at burning out those trying to support their victims. Having run out of ideas and exhausted their resources and energy, they may genuinely feel that the victim would benefit from seeking assistance elsewhere. For the victim this means facing, once again, all the challenges of starting at square one with a professional who is not familiar with their situation. It is noteworthy that victims who describe their interaction with the police and other professionals as “helpful” exhibited decreased post-traumatic

symptoms. With each negative experience, there exists the potential of increasing harm suffered by victims.

Vulnerabilities

Immigration status: The experience of being stalked can be especially daunting for victims who face special circumstances or challenges. An example is immigrant victims who are married to their stalkers and are unfamiliar with the language, laws, legal system or culture of Canada. One of the main instruments of control that stalkers use against immigrant victims is threatening their immigration status by exploiting their fears of being deported. Depending on the victim's native country and cultural roles, stalking may not be viewed as criminal or unusual. In fact to object to being stalked by one's in-laws, for example, may bring them and their family shame within their cultural community. For immigrant victims of stalking, cultural barriers and fear of deportation are often compounded by isolation and economic dependence.

Sexual orientation: Stalking occurs in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships and ex-relationships. The power and control dynamics – the desire of one partner to dominate – exist in both. However, victims of same-sex partner stalking are often afraid to come forward and seek assistance. They may fear they will be “outed”, that their sexual orientation will be disclosed. For “closeted” victims, even telling a police officer who is a stranger about their relationship may be difficult. Taking any chances of being “outed” may mean risking the relationships they have with family, friends and coworkers, their job security or custody of their children. Some may be reluctant to admit that their relationship is unhealthy because, to do so, may provide ammunition for those who put down and persecute same-sex relationships. Related is the fear that service providers will be biased. Ironically, the very fears that keep those of non-traditional sexual orientations from seeking help are often used by their stalkers as tools of intimidation.

Disabilities/challenges: People with disabilities suffer a much higher than average rate of victimization. For those who are stalked following a relationship, their prior dependency often leaves their ex-partners very well-equipped with an abundance of personal information in which to manipulate, track and terrorize the victim. For stalking victims with disabilities, the very systems they rely on for support – for transportation, food delivery, financial support and other customized services – increase their vulnerability. Because the victim cannot function without these specialized services, and there are a very limited number of service providers, it makes it incredibly easy for stalkers to track, harass and terrorize their victims. Victims with disabilities may have to contend with physical and social isolation, impediments to communication and mobility, reliance on assistive technology, or physical and financial dependence, all of which will make reporting the stalking, assisting in the gathering evidence, acquiring needed resources, developing and implementing a safety plan and accessing support services, more difficult.

Mental illness: Individuals with mental illness face many of the same vulnerabilities, difficulties and barriers as do people with disabilities. In addition, in an area where

victims are often viewed as overreacting or paranoid, victims with a mental illness are even more likely to not be taken seriously. Stalkers have an easier time escaping investigation as they point to the victim's mental illness as the reason for allegations of stalking or pose as a concerned friend or caregiver assisting the victim because they are mentally ill. Compare the victim, who may seem confused and anxious, with the stalker, who is calm and coherent – is it any wonder that the stalker is able to convince others that the victim isn't being victimized?

Gender: Male victims, particularly those living, working and/or socializing within very traditional subcultures, will have a very difficult time admitting that they are being stalked and even more difficulty seeking support services. Trying to deal with it on their own, the impacts they suffer may be more severe and longer lasting.

Other: Others facing unique and aggravating circumstances that increases\ their vulnerability and the impact that stalking has on them might include those living in remote rural areas, those with very limited financial means, those adhering to isolationist or high-risk lifestyles and, no doubt, many others too numerous to mention here.

Common Mistakes “the System” Makes

Following are some of the most common mistakes made by those in the system – counsellors, doctors, police officers and other professionals – in dealing with cases of stalking and victims. All of these have the potential of delaying the provision of services, including the development and implementation of effective risk management strategies, and thereby increases the potential for serious or lethal harm.

Stereotypical response: Crimes between intimates are more often perceived to involve a greater degree of victim responsibility or provocation and, in spite of the fact that these are the most potentially dangerous stalking situations, this way of thinking impacts the response received by those targeted by ex-intimates receive. Mistake number one is responding in a way that blames the victim, makes light of the situation and/or minimizes the risk.

Obscured by other crime(s): In those situations where blatant acts of physical violence or other serious crimes are occurring, the existence of stalking activities is often obscured. As a result, the very real and additional danger represented by the perpetrator's obsessive stalking behaviour is overlooked.

Opt for what's “quick and easy”: When another crime has occurred, the stalking is often ignored in favour of laying another charge – a breach for example – because it is so much quicker and easier. Criminal harassment has been referred to as a “building block” crime. It involves much more work on the part of everyone – the victim, the police, the Crown Prosecutor – to put together than does a single incident crime. Every isolated incident – all the “building blocks” – must to be assembled before the crime of criminal harassment is evident.

Misinterpret victim's reaction/ignore stage: The fourth mistake is not taking into consideration where the victim is at emotionally – at what stage in the process. We know that before victims tell anyone, and definitely before they ever set foot in the police station, they have gone through an extensive filtering process where they have tried to rationalize and have second guessed themselves over and over again. They probably don't have evidence or witnesses, aren't sure about dates, but if you know about the stages of a victim's experience, we know they deserve to be taken seriously and given information to help them stay safe, gather evidence and receive support services.

Disregard context: Somewhat related to ignoring where the victim is at emotionally is disregarding the context in which the stalking behaviours are happening. Even if there have only been six telephone calls and two drive-bys, the victim's fear may be compounded by the physical and sexual violence suffered while in a relationship with the stalker. Any contact, whether threatening or pleasant, is likely to cause fear and anxiety levels to peak to points that may seem unreasonable if taken out of context. Likewise, a victim's fear may not seem reasonable if there have been consensual interactions. But, put in context, interactions may be unavoidable for individuals who have children in common or a business partnership or classes together. So, the questions of "why" need to be asked. The whole story needs to be told and heard so that it can be put in context.

Dangerous advice: "Just one more time...": Probably the most common mistake we see is when well meaning friends and professionals tell victims to, "Just tell him/her one more time ...". This is such a common mistake that we advise our clients, "If you are told this, ignore it, don't do it." The advice that should be given is, "Under no circumstances, at no time, in no way, should you be communicating with this person. Doing so only feeds the obsession and encourages continued harassment."

Overlook victim behaviour: Focusing on the criminal justice system, once an investigation is under way, there is a tendency to hone in on what the stalker does and discount what the victim is doing in response. But, what victims do - relocated, installed a security system, changed telephone numbers, bought a dog – is very powerful evidence that speaks specifically to the victim's fear.

Common Mistakes Victims Make

The following are the top errors, sometimes life-threatening errors, that stalking victims make. These have been gleaned from the experiences of actual victims. As they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty. But if others are able to learn from what previous victims see clearly as their mistakes, potentially serious stalking situation may be avoided. So, arm yourselves with this valuable knowledge.

Ignoring instincts/early warning signs: Mistake number one is not listening to instincts and ignoring the early warning signs. This puts victims at a disadvantage right from the hop. You need to keep your internal radar tuned to pick up signals that something is not quite right. You also need to heed the early warning signs that annoying attention might escalate into life-altering harassment and a

dangerous pursuit. Stalkers seldom just stop. In fact, behaviours may turn more and more threatening, becoming violent, as time goes by. Victims should learn all they can, begin documenting everything and seek the assistance of a victim support person or advocate as soon as possible – at the first sign that something is wrong.

Letting someone down easy: Too often, especially for women because they tend to be the more nurturing, we choose to let others down easily because we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. This can lead potentially obsessive individuals to hear what they want to hear. While aggressive or obnoxious behaviour is not necessary, a direct approach and firm position is appropriate. Assertively communicating with a former or potential partner or a clingy friend that you no longer want them in your life is both healthy and effective. If you are not interested in a relationship or want to end a relationship, don't beat around the bush, clearly say "No."

Responding in any way, shape or form: After assertively telling someone to leave you alone only once, cease all further communication with them and do everything in your power to block their access to communicating with you. That means no bending to your stalker's demands, whether to a threat or a pleasant invitation – not even once. It also means resisting the urge to try to reason or bargain with the stalker. The stalker needs to understand that when you said "no," you meant it. Responding to the stalker is the second common mistake made by stalking targets.

Expecting "the system" to solve the problem: Even the LAPD Threat Management Unit says that victims have to take one hundred percent responsibility for dealing with their situation. Targets may seek information, advice and resources from professionals, advocates and experts. The police may provide guidance regarding what kind of documentation and other evidence they need to collect and submit in order to get a protection order or have their stalker charged. The prosecutor will explain what is expected of them to aid in securing a conviction. However, as unfair as it is, the day-to-day dealing with the situation – from documenting incidents and collecting other evidence to acquiring adequate coping skills – rests solely on the victim.

Taking inadequate safety precautions: Again, as unfair as it is, victims must take responsibility for enhancing and, as much as possible, ensuring their safety. In the course of ignoring and minimizing the problem, victims fail to see the potential risk that may exist. In their attempts to bargain and reason with their stalker, they may actually be putting themselves in harms way. Common sense, and a healthy dose of fear, is what keeps most of us out of harms way. Stalkers are not behaving logically; they are very unpredictable people. It is not a sign of weakness to experience, accept and respond to fear in constructive ways. What constitutes a major inadequacy is doing nothing because you do not want to acknowledge, to others and yourself, the potential danger that is inherent in stalking situations. Information, advice and resources are available. A bonus to developing and implementing an effective safety plan, in addition to reducing risk, is that you actually experience less fear because you feel safer.

Not enlisting support: Stalking victims too often think they can handle it on their own. They may be embarrassed to involve others because they blame themselves for the mess their life is in, or because they see asking for support as a sign of weakness. They may not want to draw in others because they don't want to be a bother, or because they fear their stalker may start targeting their loved ones. Whether it is seeking out professionals or relying on an existing network of family and friends, or some combination of the two, receiving adequate emotional support, during and after being stalked, is an absolute necessity.

Neglecting emotional needs: Finally, many victims refuse to acknowledge the emotional impact that being stalked has on them. This results in their neglecting to take adequate care of their emotional needs. When we take good care of ourselves we think clearer, we make healthier decisions and we cope with life's challenges better. For both their day-to-day wellbeing and their long term emotional health, stalking victims must be constantly assessing and addressing their emotional needs.

Victim Impact – Stages of a Victim's Experience

Although each situation is different and each victim is different, the natural reaction of most stalking victims reveals a common pattern. Unfortunately, this common pattern often aggravates the situation. Not all victims will experience every stage of this progression. Some will stay at certain stages for a longer period of time and quickly skim through other stages. And many will regress, revisiting previous stages before moving on to the next. So, please treat this as a guideline rather than a hard and fast rule.

Deny

The first stage is denial that there is a problem and/or minimizing the extent of the problem. This instantly puts the victim at a disadvantage because a problem denied is a problem not attended to. In addition, for as long as the victim is in denial, there is no evidence being collected, no log kept of stalking incidents, no phone calls flagged by using *57, no witnesses names recorded, etc. However, this is a typical human response upon first encountering an unpleasant situation. Think for a moment about how you would react to brand new neighbours who party all night, playing loud music and yelling, keeping you awake, when you have to get up for work early every morning. Hoping it's just temporary – telling yourself that maybe they're on holidays and things will get back to normal when they have to get up for work too, maybe they have company who will be leaving soon, at any rate, surely this can't go on indefinitely... Your initial reaction would be to deny and minimize. In essence, ignore the problem, do absolutely nothing about it and wait for it to go away. Stalking victims most often initially react very much in the same way – “this is just a temporary annoyance, it's not a big deal, there's no real problem here.”

Bargain

The second stage, at the point where denial is no longer possible, is to try to bargain with the stalker. Think again about your noisy neighbours. After several nights with little sleep, you might try to, ever so politely, address the problem with them. You may suggest that they turn the music down a bit or that they only party on weekends. You would very likely try to be as reasonable and as accommodating as possible, so as to avoid any hard feelings. Likewise, stalking victims often try to bargain or reason with their stalkers. Just as denial and minimizing puts the victim at a disadvantage, bargaining is not a very constructive response either. Not only does it delay the collection of evidence, it establishes a dangerous precedent whereby the stalker is controlling the victim's actions and the victim is allowing it. The message that the stalker gets is loud and clear, "if I am persistent, I will get the results I hope for – a reaction from, the attention of and control over my target. Further, if, in trying to bargain or reason with the stalker, the victim exhibits signs of fear, or even discomfort or concern, the result may be a heightened sense of power and control. Regardless, bargaining of any kind only serves to reinforce that there are rewards to be reaped by continuing the stalking behaviours.

Anxiety

When attempts to ignore and reason with the stalker fail, anxiety sets in. After talking to your neighbours, let's say nothing changes, or worse, the partying gets even rowdier than before. Envisioning months, or even years, of sleepless nights, you would begin to feel a great deal of anxiety over the whole thing. In addition to the nights you spend lying in bed, awake and listening to the pounding of your neighbour's stereo, a great deal of your days would also be spent thinking about your neighbours and how they are so inconsiderate and how your polite little talk with them was ignored and how awful life is going to be as long as they are living next door to you... Similarly, never knowing when or where their stalker will show up next and speculating what their stalker might be capable of, the stalking victim can think of little else. This is where they start to short-circuit mentally and emotionally.

Exhaustion

It is no wonder that exhaustion follows, along with depression. Carrying around such a heavy burden, day in and day out - whether it's a noisy neighbour who keeps you up every night or a stalker who is persistent, unpredictable and becoming scarier by the day - takes its toll. Drained by the experience, unable to fathom a solution, and seeing no end in sight, a sense of hopelessness begins to set in. Just like the noisy neighbour might become the central focus of your life, the stalker takes over the stalking victim's life.

Self-blame

As exhaustion and depression take hold, many victims go through a period of time where they blame themselves for what is happening. While you may start thinking

you were too nice to your noisy neighbours when they first moved in, or you weren't firm enough when you confronted them, or maybe, even though you cannot quite put your finger on it, you surely must have done something terrible to deserve such a horrible fate... The stalking victim is also thinking, "What did I do wrong or what should I have done differently?" At this point it is easier for victims to believe it is something they have done, it is their fault, somehow they are to blame, rather than admit that someone else has so much power and control over their life. As long as it is their fault, they feel some degree of control and some level of hope that they have the power to make it better.

Anger

Eventually, after reaching this low point where they are not only exhausted, depressed, feeling hopeless and taking full responsibility for the mess "they've" made of their lives, logical thinking kicks in and victims get angry. This is a good thing, providing of course, that their anger doesn't land them in jail. This is where you march over to your neighbour's house and blast them for their total lack of respect and perhaps even throw the odd threat of arrest or eviction into the conversation. Whereas depression is a de-motivator, anger is a motivator and victims often get so angry that they are ready and willing to do almost anything to get the stalker out of their life.

Acceptance

Of course, the anger has to subside somewhat before victims can look at their situation objectively. At some point they see their predicament clearly and ultimately accept what life has become for them. Your neighbours aren't going anywhere and they have no intention of changing their lifestyle to accommodate your desire for a good night's sleep. You finally accept that it is what it is - this is what your life is with them living next door.

Constructive Action

Once their anger subsides and acceptance takes hold, victims are able to respond to their situation in constructive ways. This is where you may start reporting every one of your neighbours' parties as a noise violation to the police. After a few \$500 fines, your neighbours may think twice about cranking up their stereo. This stage in their process is where we have the clients that we just love to work with. They are great at documenting everything, gathering evidence and getting witnesses to become involved. They want to learn as much as they can and devour every bit of information they get their hands on. They don't hesitate to report every incident or breach to the police. They are reasonably concerned about their safety and take appropriate precautions. They seek out support services to address their emotional needs and they welcome the assistance of their victim services worker. This is also where they become their own best advocates. They begin the hard work of taking back their power and regaining control of their lives.

Victim Impact – In Their Words

“I wake up every morning, wondering if this is the day I will die at the hand of my stalker. I spend the day looking over my shoulder for him. I jump every time the phone rings. I can’t sleep at night from worrying, and when I do sleep, I have nightmares of him. I can’t escape him, not even for a minute. I never have a moment’s peace, awake or asleep.”

“It takes away your life, it’s the constant looking over your shoulder, wondering who’s watching, what will happen next – it’s no way to live.”

- Stalking victims

Victim Impact – Positive Coping

One of the aspects of human behaviour that makes life so very interesting is that we are all wired differently and, in any given situation, no two of us will react in exactly the same way. How a particular target reacts to being stalked will depend on a number of factors. These might include their past experience with stress and/or trauma, the severity and frequency of the stalking incidents, the degree to which they are being taken seriously, the supports they have in place, etc. One of the goals of intervention, in addition to the ultimate goals of enhancing victim safety, stopping the harassment and making stalkers accountable, is to help victims cope better with what they are faced with.

Recognize and Redirect Negative Coping

The first step in promoting positive coping is to recognize behaviours that indicate a victim is on a path of adopting negative coping strategies.

Avoidance: One of the most obvious negative coping strategies is avoidance. Victims avoid issues by self-medicating or using alcohol or drugs as an escape. They may also isolate themselves by locking themselves in their homes or ignoring the inquiries of friends and family to avoid facing the fact that their life is out of control.

Denial and self-deception: Akin to avoidance, denial and self-deception is another negative coping strategy. Because they are so painful, victims may engage in numbing emotionally through blocking memories and feelings and denying or minimizing their internal stress. Of course, it builds in spite of their efforts to suppress, often with destructive consequences.

Cognitively narrowed focus: Seemingly opposite to avoidance, denial and self-deception is when victims cognitively narrow their focus – when they become overly focused on the traumatic events and ignore everything else, including the options and supports available to them. Basically, they become stuck in a “black hole.” They only see themselves as a victim and behave in ways that prevent them from moving to becoming a survivor.

Information seeking

Positive coping strategies include victims seeking information about the situation they are in. Victims need information about stalking, stalkers, risk, safety, and what resources and supports are available to them. They also need to know how to best deal with their situation and what they can do to change it. If you want to disempower someone, keep them in the dark. Because information opens the door to choices, it is empowering and motivating. Victims who seek and receive information cope much better.

Cognitively reframing “victimization”

While some victims may first need and embrace the term “victim” because it emphasizes that the crime of stalking, and the fact that they are being stalked, is not their fault, some will feel better and cope better referring to themselves as survivors. The term “survivor” implies strength, competency and determination; it emphasizes the positive aspects of having survived. Stalking targets who come to think of themselves as survivors will cope better than those who get stuck in being a victim. The qualities associated with survivor are not only flattering, they are empowering and motivating.

Activities

Stalking targets who are empowered and motivated will engage in activities geared toward regaining control of their lives. These may include taking a self-defence class, providing information to the police to initiate an investigation, gathering evidence on an ongoing basis, safe-proofing their homes, testifying in court... Doing anything, however small and even if it is not particularly effective, is better than doing nothing. Those who actively do something to lessen the impact of, or stop altogether, the harassment they are experiencing cope much better.

Activism

One step up from getting active is getting active in the public domain. Some victims will apply their stalking experience to a social level. They may participate in public presentations or media interviews, they might write about their experience, or help other stalking victims, through volunteering as a peer supports or by raising funds. They may become advocates for change or otherwise make their experience freely available for the public’s benefit. Activism provides victims with a means of turning something negative into something positive. And, it is a double positive because, as they are coping better as a result of their social contribution, the public’s awareness and knowledge is enhanced.

Use of supports

Finally, it goes without saying that, throughout their entire stalking experience, victims who utilize supports – both professional and personal – cope much better during, and regain normalcy more quickly, following their ordeal.

Victim Impact – Community Collaboration

Stalking is not a single, obvious, easily identifiable criminal act. Stalking behaviours are complex, varied and unpredictable. There may be no overt threat and few clues that readily define isolated stalking incidents as part of a continuum of conduct that is criminal in nature. There is no single or standard stalker profile that might assist investigators and making generalizations about stalkers can be very dangerous. Victim safety is always a priority; yet, in stalking cases, because of the unpredictable nature of stalkers, assessing risk is especially difficult. Any intervention, including criminal justice intervention, may be ineffective or even cause an escalation on the part of the stalker and must, as a result, be carefully monitored and go hand in hand with actions that protect the victim. In summary, effective investigation and prosecution of stalking cases depends on gathering information from many sources and seeing “the big picture.”

Like a complex puzzle, all the pieces must be fitted together to identify the crime, let alone solve it and end the harassment. Therefore, strategies to address stalking must reach beyond the boundaries of traditional “reactive” policing and embrace the principles and practices of community-oriented policing. A community oriented approach means early identification of problems and early intervention to enhance victim safety and prevent repeat victimization. Identifying, investigating and prosecuting stalking cases, accurately assessing risk and protecting targets, preventing further harassment and addressing the practical and emotional needs of primary and secondary victims are all tasks that cry out for the kind of proactive, collaborative, problem solving that are the hallmarks of community policing. The challenge is to find ways for police agencies, community partners, victims and their families to translate the principles of community oriented policing into practices that meet the desired outcomes in stalking cases. The potential benefits make the effort worthwhile.

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