

Women's Center Update: Be aware of stalking dangers

Lisa Michele Utzig

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January 2007 marks the fourth annual observance of National Stalking Awareness Month. Stalking is a serious and deadly crime that victimizes more than one million women a year and nearly 400,000 men each year. Celebrity stalkers often make headlines in the news and in tabloids all too often, but it is not only the rich and famous who are victims of this frightening crime: The majority of stalking victims are ordinary people.

Stalking is a crime in all 50 states, yet it is rarely taken seriously. There are many myths about stalking that aid in contributing to the misconception that stalking is no big deal, or that stalking is not really dangerous, just weird and creepy. In reality, three out of four women who were murdered by their intimate partners were stalked by these partners before they were killed.

The legal definition of stalking is different in each state, but most states define stalking as a course of conduct that places a person in fear for his/her safety and the willful, malicious and repeated following and harassing of another person. These harassing or threatening behaviors may include verbal threats, sexual advances, phone calls, letters, inappropriate touching, showing up at a person's work or home uninvited, and destroying property.

If you are a victim of stalking, it is very important to create a safety plan; vary your routines and driving routes, ask co-workers and family to screen calls, install locks on all windows and doors, as well as adequate lighting (both indoors and out), keep your critical documents and phone numbers with you or in another safe place. A stalker will do anything to get your attention. When confronted by a stalker in any way, it is important to never respond or try to reason with this individual. If a stalker requests to meet with you, even in a crisis situation, do not respond. Remember, any contact with you is what the stalker wants, and by returning contact, the stalker may feel encouraged to continue stalking you. And most importantly, if at any time you are afraid for your safety, do not hesitate to call 911.

There are numerous ways in which a victim can take action to hold the stalker accountable for his or her behavior. It can be very helpful to document any evidence; take pictures of any damage caused by the stalker, record all phone conversations and messages left on voice mail, answering machines and e-mail; write down each event with as much detail as possible; alert critical people (co-workers, friends, supportive family members) to the situation; and report any suspicious activity to the police.

If you or someone you know feels threatened, harassed, intimidated or in fear for your safety, the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center can help. If you would like to speak with an advocate or if you would like more information on obtaining a harassment or restraining order, please call our 24-hour crisis line at (530) 544-4444 or stop by our office at 2941 Lake Tahoe Blvd., across from South Tahoe Middle School.

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- Lisa Michele Utzig is the outreach coordinator at the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center.