



Stalking Safety Tips

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Stalking is a terrifying situation that involves such behaviors as persistent phone calls (both at home and on the job) or text messages, receiving unwanted gifts, physical and/or technological surveillance and a number of other frightening invasions of your home and privacy.



According to the latest figures I saw, there are approximately 1.4 million stalking victims a year. Most are women and most stalkers are men. Most victims are not celebrities but ordinary people who know their stalker and may have had a prior relationship of some kind with the stalker: business, dating, live-in partner or marriage.

Unfortunately, if you're in a stalking situation, there's no single course of action that will end the harassment or stalking but a few tactics have proven effective over time. Bottom line, though, all the safety tips involve changing your normal day to day routine and altering your way of life radically until the situation resolves itself. This is extremely unfair but you have no choice; this is the only thing that works.

1. **First and foremost, have no contact with the stalker.** Stalkers feed on your attention, and that of anyone close to you, and whether that attention is positive or negative makes no difference to them. Never recruit a large friend or relative to "handle" things for you; only the police should contact or confront the stalker.
2. **Document every call, letter or package the stalker sends to you and any face-to-face contact.** Keep a journal. This will be necessary if you decide to get an Order of Protection or take legal action. Return any packages unopened or turn them over to the Police; whatever they advise.
3. **Tell your family, friends, neighbors, landlord/apartment complex manager and employer and co-workers that you're being stalked so that they don't inadvertently give out your contact information.** Show them a picture of the stalker (take one with a camera phone) because many times stalkers impersonate repair or deliverymen and even law enforcement personnel to gain access to their victim or the victim's premises.
4. **Get advice from a victim assistance program or stalking counselor before you decide to file for an Order of Protection or Injunction against Harassment.** There are many pros and some very serious cons involved with this. Since each stalking case is unique, know all your options before you make a final decision. And, have them help you put a safety plan in place should things get out of hand.

5. **Think carefully about changing your phone number, getting an unlisted number and/or setting up a message screening service with your phone service provider.** This sounds like a reasonable idea, but some stalkers become enraged by this and it can prompt the stalker to come to the victim's home or office in a desperate attempt to make contact. It might even provoke an assault, so you want to be prepared for different possibilities if you do this.

Be sneaky about it. You don't want to tip the stalker off that the number has been changed for as long as possible. A better tactic, if you can afford it, is to get a second phone line with an unlisted number and give it out very selectively. Make sure it has Caller ID and a screening device that prohibits unidentified callers or allows you to select what calls you receive.

Keep an answering machine on your old number to pick up the stalker's calls and never answer that phone. Turn off the ringer so you're not bothered in the middle of the night and keep all the calls so you'll have a good record of the harassment in case you decide to prosecute.

If getting a second line is too costly, just keep your answering machine on all the time and don't answer the phone unless you've screened the call. Keep a cell phone handy in case the stalker cuts your phone line.

✓ *The most important thing to remember if you find yourself in a stalking situation or are a survivor of one is that nothing that happened to you was your fault and you did nothing to deserve this harassment. Even if you think you used bad judgment in a situation and left yourself vulnerable, that's never an excuse or justification for the crime of stalking (or any crime, for that matter). Please call yourself a survivor, not a victim, and know that with the proper professional help you can put what happened into perspective and get on with your life.*

Resources:

Stalking in America: www.esia.net/safety_tips

Stalking Behavior: www.stalkingbehavior.com

Privacy Rights Clearinghouse: www.privacyrights.org

Stalking Tips: stopyourstalker.com

Stalking Information: www.answers.com/topic/stalking

www.grandcentral.com (the best phone screening service around)

www.familyjusticecenters.org (the best counseling organization around; centers all over the country and internationally)

homesecurity911.com (for a wealth of home security information)

Susan Bartelstone is a Crime Prevention and Personal Safety Specialist and host of Crime Prevention 101, the personal safety talkradio show on the VoiceAmerica.com network. Author of Think Fast and Prevent a Violent Crime: How to Respond to Danger in 20 Seconds (or Less!), and dubbed "the Ann Landers of Self Defense" by the media, she's helped thousands of people solve their personal safety dilemmas with her practical advice—which stresses the many opportunities you have to avoid or defuse a criminal encounter...and how to use your brains instead of your muscles in a fight.