



The popular Netflix series *YOU* is returning for a fifth and final season (trailer [available here](#)). The trailer promises “a killer finale,” and all signs point to Joe continuing to stalk and murder until the end.

What can *YOU* teach us about real stalking victimization? This short discussion guide highlights some major themes from the previous four seasons. Complete discussion guides on [season one](#), [season two](#), [season three](#), and [season four](#) are also available. Consider using this guide as a starting point for further learning and sharing relevant [fact sheets](#), [infographics](#), and [short videos](#) to introduce key information on stalking and intimate partner violence. SPARC’s [short video](#) and [slides](#) about media normalization of stalking can also enhance this discussion.

1) ISN'T IT ROMANTIC?











YOU is a psychological thriller — not a romance. However, throughout the series, Joe refers to romance films and even points out how his actions mirror those of romantic “heroes.” A popular trope in romantic media suggests that if you pursue someone persistently enough — and push through their disinterest and rejection — they will eventually fall in love with you.

Discussion Questions:

- **What other characters who are “guys like Joe” have you seen represented in romantic films or stories?** How are these characters similar to him? How are they different?
- **In media where a male protagonist will “stop at nothing to get the girl,” what usually happens?** Are these characters heroes or villains?
- Many fans of the show have expressed love for Joe, tweeting things like “Kidnap me pls” and “Penn Badgley is breaking my heart as Joe...what is it about him?” **What is it about Joe’s behaviors that may be appealing to viewers? What romantic ideas does his character evoke?**
 - Follow-up: How might ideas like “all’s fair in love and war,” “love takes work,” and “I’ll do anything for love” impact Joe’s self-image and our perceptions of Joe?

Main Points:

- Romantic films often include protagonists who are “guys like Joe” – ones who stop at nothing to “get the girl.” Examples include Edward in *Twilight*, Christian in *50 Shades of Gray*, and plenty of older romantic comedies like *Say Anything*, *You’ve Got Mail*, *There’s Something About Mary*, and many more. They are typically idealistic and not murderous, though.
- These characters are often presented as awkward, funny, sweet and/or passionate rather than scary and problematic. They are usually conventionally attractive, single men who our society deems desirable.
- Usually, there is no negative consequence for their actions – in fact, the stalking is successful and they persuade their initially reluctant romantic interests that they should be together. They are rewarded despite requests to stop and ignoring her rejections. This “romantic pursuit” usually ends with “guys like Joe” winning over their love interests – the stalker “wears them down” until they “come around” and “see the truth.”
- It’s a romantic fantasy to think that someone might immediately see the real us and fall in love instantly – it’s exciting to feel like someone sees us and thinks we’re special, attractive, and desirable. While people can certainly be attracted and/or interested in someone from an early stage, fixation after one meeting is not normal or healthy.
- In real life, most stalkers are not people we want attention from. They are usually ex-partners or acquaintances who are trying to scare their victims.

STALKING	
FANTASY	REALITY
<p>The stalker is an attractive stranger, charming chance encounter, or desirable “secret admirer.”</p> 	<p>The stalker is usually known to the victim, most often an acquaintance or intimate partner (current or former).</p> 
<p>The stalker has only good and pure intentions, usually romantic.</p> 	<p>Stalkers have different motivations, but often intend to scare their victims and/or do not stop when the victim is scared.</p> 
<p>The stalker’s actions range from sexy to flattering to harmless. At worst, they’re awkward or misguided.</p> 	<p>Stalking behaviors are interfering, invasive, disturbing, and violent. Stalking can escalate quickly and often co-occurs with or predicts serious violence, including homicide.</p> 
<p>The stalker’s target should feel grateful, amused, flattered and/ or affectionate towards the stalker. It’s nice to get this attention and feel special.</p> 	<p>Most stalking victims feel extreme fear and emotional distress. Many significantly change their daily lives and even relocate to try to get away from the stalker.</p> 

2) TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS?

In each season, multiple characters instinctively distrust Joe. Some maintain their skepticism, some come around to liking him (at least for a while), and many are killed.

Discussion Questions:

- **How might instincts play a role in identifying a stalker? Why might people minimize or ignore their instincts?**
- In season four, Phoebe is the ringleader of her posh social group. She unreservedly likes Joe and continues to include him in events and let him into her circle, despite her friends’ objections. **Why might it be hard for someone with less power in the group to speak up about their concerns and/or avoid the person who is making them uncomfortable?**
- Later in the season, Phoebe (accurately) suspects that she has a stalker – but no one believes her. In episode six, Adam calls her “paranoid” and Joe says he “assumed she was overreacting.” **How might friends’ responses impact stalking victims, and victims’ trust in their own instincts?**




 "I knew something was off about you, and I was right."
 -Peach (Season 1, Episode 6)

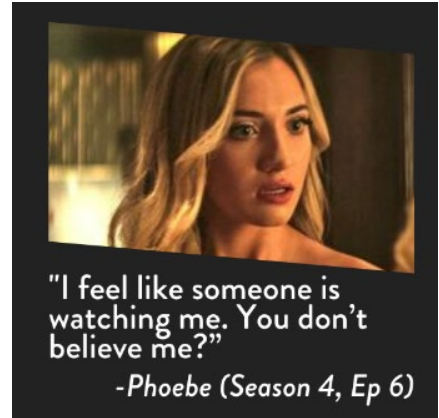

 "My first impression of you was...weirdo."
 -Delilah (Season 2, Episode 7)


 "You are a hollow nobody with no life of his own."
 - Kate (Season 4, Ep 2)

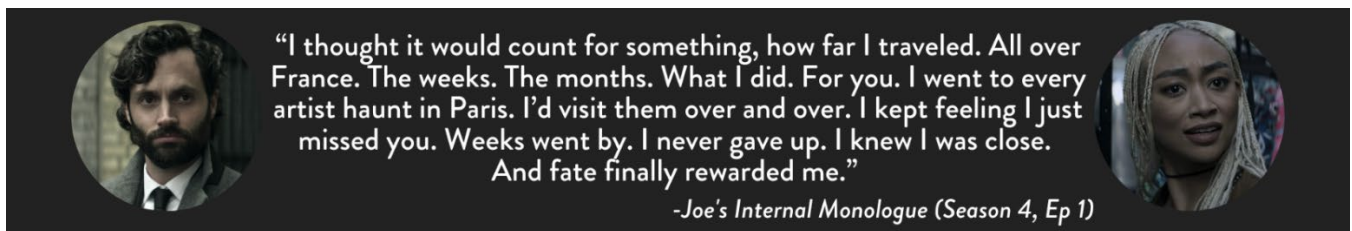

 "What I find dodgy about you, mate, is absolutely f*cking everything."
 - Vic, Phoebe's Bodyguard (Season 4, Ep 2)

Main Points:

- Stalking survivors often share the same message – to trust your instincts. When someone is making you uncomfortable, there is likely a reason.
- People may ignore or minimize their instincts because they worry they are being unfair or unkind. They may want to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. They may feel that it would be awkward to say something or want to wait for proof that the person is a problem before saying anything – but it’s okay to trust your instincts and disengage when someone is making you uncomfortable.
- Most stalkers and victims know each other and share social circles. When a leader with power in the group, like Phoebe, decides someone is “in,” it can be awkward, divisive, and have negative social consequences for other members of the group to speak up when they are uncomfortable.
- Most victims of stalking share their concerns with a friend or family member before seeking any official help. When those trusted people minimize, dismiss, or do not believe the victim, it often causes victims to further distrust their own instincts and decreases the chances that they will seek further help.
- Many stalking victims are dismissed as paranoid when in fact they are being reasonably hypervigilant in response to a frightening or distressing situation.



3) DOESN'T JOE DESERVE LOVE? HE WORKS SO HARD!



For four seasons, we've seen Joe target and stalk many romantic interests — including Candace, Beck, Love, Natalie, Marianne, and Kate. His goal was to find “the one” and he's consistently justified his behaviors, from peering into windows to outright murder, in order to pursue these women.

Season four begins with Joe searching for Marianne, who has relocated to France after changing her number, leaving no address, and going dark on social media. His internal monologue shares the thought that “love chooses us. The only thing we can control is what we do. How far we go.” Later in the same episode, he watches Kate masturbate through her window and thinks to himself, “Why does the universe keep doing this to me?” Towards the end of the season, his dark side tells him, “All you ever wanted was to be seen, to be loved, and you've been willing to earn it the hard way.”

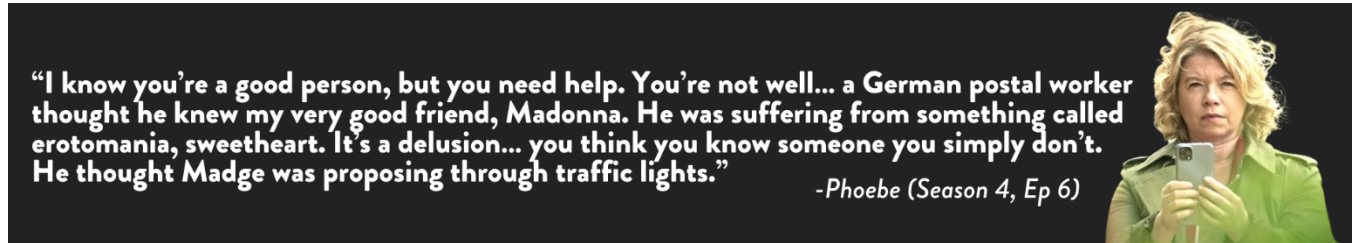
Discussion Questions:

- **How might cultural attitudes/sayings about love and destiny be misused to justify stalking and/or abusive behaviors** (for example, “love chooses us” or “never give up on love”)?
- **Does Joe’s decision to stalk Marianne mean that she owes him something? Is he entitled to her attention?**
- **What do you make of Joe’s interpretation that “fate finally rewarded [him]” when he gets a clue as to Marianne’s location?**
- Joe stalks people while pursuing relationships, while relationships are going well, and/or after they fall apart. He stalks romantic interests as well others who he deems threatening to himself or the people he cares about. **Is there any situation in which you think Joe would feel he’s gotten what he wanted and can now stop stalking? Does Joe take any accountability for his actions?**

Main Points:

- The romanticization of the idea that one should pursue a romantic interest at all costs and stop at nothing robs the romantic interest of any agency and disrespects their actual wants.
- Joe uses concepts like “fate” and “destiny” to avoid responsibility for his own choices, pretending that he’s just a pawn in some grand romantic plan rather than recognizing that he is making his own decisions.
- Marianne has changed her number, left no address, relocated to another country, and gone dark on social media. She clearly does not want Joe to find her.
- Marianne does not owe Joe anything. Joe is choosing to focus on finding Marianne regardless of what she wants and does not want. Working hard to pursue someone who doesn’t want to be pursued doesn’t mean he has earned anything.
- Joe consistently chooses to lie, stalk, and kill – but he consistently absolves himself of responsibility for his actions, going so far as to invent Rhys as an external alter-ego forcing him to cause harm.
- Joe may say (to himself) that he’s stalking “for love,” but it’s clear that he chooses to stalk again and again and enjoys doing it. He usually tells himself that he is stalking in pursuit of some goal (love or protecting someone), but even when the mission is accomplished (for instance, having a loving wife or eliminating the threat), he continues. There are no external reasons that force him to stalk. He chooses to stalk.
- Joe occasionally notes “I’ve made mistakes,” but never seems to feel too badly about his trail of violence and murder. There’s a sense that things had to work out in these ways, when in fact, he puts these events into motion.

4) ARE STALKERS CRAZY?



Season four introduces the term “erotomania” and includes a second stalker, Dawn, an obsessed fan who stalks Joe’s famous friend, Phoebe. Both Joe and Dawn are described as erotomaniac.

The season’s twist reveals that Joe has actually been stalking Rhys Montrose, a public figure, and imagining a relationship with him that never existed (while also obsessively watching the real Rhys, taking items from him, and, ultimately, killing him).

In reality, most stalkers do not have severe psychological disorders.

One study found that fewer than 2% of stalkers had major psychiatric conditions (such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression¹). While stalking and mental health issues can intersect and more research is needed, stalking – like sexual and intimate partner violence – is not simply a mental health issue.

Discussion Questions:

- Many people assume that stalkers are “crazy” and describe stalking as a mental health issue – despite the reality that the vast majority of stalkers do not have any significant co-occurring mental illness.

Why might it be easier to think of stalkers as “crazy” than to acknowledge that most are actually just people who choose to stalk and try to exert power and control?


- Joe has been stalking people since season one. **Does presenting Joe as deeply delusional this season make him seem less responsible for his past behaviors? How or how not?**
- Like Dawn and Joe, delusional stalkers in real life are more likely to target celebrities than people they actually know. Dawn and Joe are both incredibly dangerous stalkers – Dawn actually kidnaps Phoebe and approaches her with a knife, and Joe tortures and kills his victim. In reality, while all stalkers can be dangerous, stalkers who target strangers are the *least* likely to threaten and/or harm their victims. **Why would an intimate partner stalker be more dangerous, on average, than a stranger stalker?**



¹ Patton, C.L., Nobles, M.R., & Fox, K.A. (2010) Look who’s stalking: Obsessive pursuit and attachment theory. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38: 282-290.

Main Points:

- It may be more comforting to dismiss stalkers as simply “crazy” than to realize that, actually, *anyone* can be a stalker – including people we know, like, and consider sane.
- It would be nice to believe that stalkers do not understand the harms they are causing and that their intentions are being misinterpreted. In reality, that is rarely true – most stalkers want to scare their victims and are consciously choosing to do so.
- Joe’s delusions this season may contribute to the myth that stalkers are crazy and not aware or in control of the harm they are causing.
- Mental health is complex. When someone with a mental health issue causes harm, this does not mean that the person is in no way responsible for their choices or behaviors.



% by Stalker Relationship to Victim	Intimate Partner	Acquaintance	Private Stranger	Public Figure
Presence of Threats	83	66	50	18
Presence of Violence	74	50	36	2

Mohandie, K., Meloy, J.R., McGowan, M.G., & Williams, J. (2006). The RECON Typology of Stalking: Reliability and Validity Based upon a Large Sample of North American Stalkers. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 51(1): 147-155.

- The more information and access a stalker has to their victim, the more threatening and violent they are likely to be. Intimate partner and acquaintance stalkers know more about their victims’ routines, schedules, and fears than a stranger would. Victims who are public figures are also likely to have more security and resources.

Stay tuned for the Season Five Discussion Guide, coming soon!

Learn more about stalking at www.StalkingAwareness.org.