MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' GUIDE TO SUPPORTING CLIENTS EXPERIENCING STALKING

SPARC STALKING PREVENTION, AWARENESS, AND RESOURCE CENTER

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This Guide is for mental health professionals working with clients who may be experiencing stalking. It provides information about the impacts of experiencing stalking and important components of effectively responding to a client who is experiencing stalking. To learn more about how to identify stalking, see SPARC's companion resource Listening for Stalking in Mental Health Settings. For additional resources and support on the health impacts of stalking, visit www.StalkingAwareness.org/Vital-Signs/ and contact SPARC at tta@stalkingawareness.org. SPARC does not provide direct support to victims of stalking.

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Why Mental Health Settings?

People experiencing stalking need assistance, but few know how or where to ask for help. Most people who are stalked do not seek out crime victim services or report to police. However, one study found that 32% of people experiencing stalking visited a mental health professional for support in managing the negative psychological and emotional impacts of the stalking.[1] That means more people who are stalked go to mental health professionals than to police or victim services for help with their situation. Mental health settings are a critical entry point to identify stalking, manage the mental health impacts of stalking, and help connect clients with appropriate services and resources to enhance their safety.

"I did not know how bad it would get. I very quickly sank into a depression and a huge drop in mood which was noticed by others. I was not my normal self. I struggled with the loss of conversation and was worried about how bad it was going to get. I struggled with focusing at work and with everyday tasks. I found myself losing my sense of humor and confidence. I found that it was all I could think about. The worst part was the bad headspace was getting more intense as the harassment and stalking progressed. I was quickly feeling trapped and powerless. I did not know what to do."
– Stalking Survivor

Supporting clients experiencing stalking may present unique challenges, and it is important for mental health professionals to feel empowered to recognize and respond to this serious form of abuse. Understanding the impacts, assessing risk, safety planning, and making the appropriate referrals can help clients experiencing stalking improve their mental health and keep them safer. To learn more about stalking in general, see SPARC's resource Listening for Stalking in Mental Health Settings and the resources listed below.

- For an overview on stalking dynamics and behaviors:
  - Review this SPARC Stalking Victim Handbook (also a great tool for discussing stalking with clients)
  - Complete these eLearning Courses (10-20 minutes each)
  - Watch this series of SPARC awareness videos (15 minutes)

WHAT IS STALKING?

Legal definitions of stalking vary by jurisdiction, so a good general one is:
a pattern of behavior directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to fear for their safety or the safety of others; or suffer substantial emotional distress.

- For a more in-depth look at stalking and health:
    - Infographic on Stalking & Health
    - Fact Sheet: Stalking & Health (Spanish available here)
    - Short Video: Health Impacts of Stalking
    - Webinar/recorded training: Health Impacts of Stalking for Healthcare Professionals

- Stalking often co-occurs with other types of victimizations and criminal behavior. Here are some resources to learn more about co-occurring victimizations:
    - Fact Sheet: Stalking and Intimate Partner Violence
    - Short Video: Stalking and Intimate Partner Violence
    - Webinar/recorded training: Stalking & Intimate Partner Violence
    - Fact Sheet: Stalking and Sexual Violence
    - Stalking Behaviors and Sexual Violence
    - Short Video: Sexual Violence & Stalking
    - Webinar/recorded training: Stalking & Sexual Violence: Understanding the Intersections

Working With Clients Experiencing Stalking

People experiencing stalking may seek mental health care for relief from their psychological and emotional symptoms, as well as for assistance with the problem. Stalking may also begin during a mental health professional's ongoing work with a client. Mental health professionals play a vital role in supporting clients who experience stalking by providing a safe, validating space to process their experiences and begin healing. Through trauma-informed care, mental health professionals can help clients understand the psychological impacts of stalking and work toward restoring a sense of safety and control. Because stalking is often misunderstood or minimized, mental health professionals are in a unique position to help clients name the behavior, recognize its impacts, and validate their responses. By addressing both the emotional and practical challenges of stalking, mental health professionals can be an essential part of a client's recovery and empowerment.

"Talking about it saved me. Being open about it, that's what helped me get through it."
– Stalking Survivor

Client Reactions and Responses

Reactions to stalking are as diverse as the clients experiencing stalking themselves. However, clients who are stalked may share several common responses:

- **Minimizing:** Clients experiencing stalking may minimize individual stalking behaviors and the risk the offender poses. They may isolate events—focusing on a recent, less serious behavior instead of connecting it to more serious violations in the past. For example:
    - "They're only text messages."
    - "They would never really harm me."
    - "It's been worse than this before."
- **Avoiding family or friends:** Clients may avoid family and friends because they feel embarrassed, ashamed, or responsible for what is happening. In many instances, the stalker is someone known to the client, their family, and their friends. They may avoid contact with loved ones in order to also avoid the perpetrator. They may be afraid they won't be believed or that their friends and family will take sides against them. Clients experiencing stalking may also avoid loved ones in an attempt to keep them safe from the stalker.
- **Negotiating for safety:** Clients may negotiate with the stalker for their own or others' safety. They may agree to demands the stalker makes or maintain contact in an effort to know where the stalker is, what their daily plans are, and prevent additional harm.
- **Taking steps to improve their personal security:** Clients may engage in informal safety planning on their own to cope with the stalker's tactics and behaviors. For example, they may take a different route to school or work, temporarily stay with a friend, or change the locks on their door.

It is important to validate your client's reactions to the stalking while offering guidance and collaborating on how to increase their physical and emotional safety and well-being. It is also critical to recognize that the client's attempts to distance themselves from their stalker may frustrate or anger the stalker, leading to an escalation of their stalking tactics and/or an increase in the physical threat to the client's life. This complexity highlights the importance of ongoing risk assessment and safety planning in stalking cases, which may happen in the mental health setting and/or through appropriate referrals to victim advocates.

Providing Validation and Education

Mental health professionals can provide education for clients who are experiencing stalking, especially when they do not fully recognize or name the behavior as such. By gently introducing information about what constitutes stalking, the diversity of stalking behaviors, and how it often escalates and intersects with other forms of abuse, mental health professionals can help clients make sense of their experiences. This awareness helps validate clients' feelings of discomfort, frustration, and fear, reassuring them that their reactions are legitimate and they are not overreacting. Education also helps reduce the shame and self-blame that people experiencing stalking often carry, particularly when the stalker is someone they know.

SPARC has a short handbook that can help clients experiencing stalking understand their experiences and consider next steps, which you can access from our website: Short Handbook for Stalking Victims. Providing clients with the handbook can help start the conversation about stalking and how it can impact mental health. Ask the client if they would feel safe taking printed materials with them. If so, you can download and print the handbook for the client so that they can share the information with a friend or loved one. If the client does not feel safe taking the printed materials with them, provide them with SPARC's website so they can access the information when it is safe for them to do so, taking into consideration that the stalker may be accessing the client's technology.

Understanding that stalking is a crime—not just a misunderstanding or personal conflict—can empower clients to see their situation more clearly and begin to consider steps toward safety and justice. As clients become more informed, they may feel more confident exploring additional support options, such as talking to a victim advocate, documenting incidents, or seeking legal recourse. In this way, mental health professionals can help clients move from confusion and isolation toward clarity, strength, and agency.

Understanding the Impact

The psychological and emotional effects of stalking can manifest in a variety of ways. 92% of people who are stalked report one or more psychological impacts from the stalking,[2] and people who are stalked are more likely to develop chronic mental illness than people who are not stalked.[3] People who are stalked have a higher prevalence of anxiety, insomnia, social dysfunction, and severe depression than the general population, especially if

the course of conduct includes being followed and/or the destruction of property.[4] People who experience stalking also report increased substance use and misuse, as well as suicidal ideation.[5] Mental health professionals must discuss with clients how to manage these effects.

"I wake up every morning, wondering if this is the day I will die at the hands 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."
– Stalking Survivor

Clients who are stalked may experience anticipatory fear—the fear of what the stalker will do next, when they will see or hear from the stalker next, or when they will be harmed again. This fear stems from the persistent uncertainty and perceived threat that the stalker may reappear, escalate their behavior, or cause harm at any moment.

Unlike a single traumatic event, stalking involves ongoing, unpredictable intrusions into the client's life. This can lead to a prolonged state of stress and anxiety and result in hypervigilance. Over time, this constant state of alertness and fear can disrupt daily functioning and contribute to core PTSD symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, avoidance behaviors, emotional numbing, and heightened arousal.[6] The chronic nature of stalking-induced fear—particularly anticipatory fear—can make recovery especially challenging, as the sense of safety necessary for healing is often repeatedly undermined.

Clients who are stalked may experience a variety of somatic symptoms, including headaches, general aches and pains, feelings of weakness or numbness, sleeping too much or too little, nightmares and persistent dreaming, and changes in weight.[7] Increased anxiety, common among people who are stalked, is also connected to physical symptoms, including shaking, chest pains, and panic attacks. The physical manifestations of stress include a lowered immune system response and can influence current or underlying medical conditions. Support from a medical professional may help a client being stalked manage the physical effects they are experiencing.

The impact of stalking on the mental and emotional health of clients affects both their ability to safety plan while the stalking is ongoing, as well as their ability to recover after it has ended. Many people who are stalked feel that the stalking is never truly over, as stalkers are often persistent offenders who may continue their behavior for years. Even if a stalker ends up in jail or prison, they may find ways to contact your client while incarcerated, and your client may fear the day their stalker is released. Regardless of whether or not the stalking behaviors have truly stopped, the impacts of experiencing prolonged feelings of anticipatory fear and hypervigilance can continue to persist and negatively affect the mental health of clients who have experienced stalking.

Social Impacts of Stalking

Stalking can significantly disrupt a client's social functioning, often leading to profound social isolation. The persistent fear of being watched, followed, or contacted can cause clients to withdraw from everyday activities, avoid public places, and limit interactions with friends, family, or co-workers. Clients who are being stalked may change their routines, relocate, or cut off social ties in an effort to stay safe, which can erode their support systems and contribute to feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Additionally, the psychological toll of stalking—such as anxiety, hypervigilance, and distrust—can make it difficult to form or maintain relationships, further deepening social withdrawal. Over time, this isolation can exacerbate mental health issues like depression and PTSD, creating a cycle where the impacts of stalking extend far beyond the immediate threat and deeply affect a client's quality of life.

"I have had strong feelings of depression which has had a significant impact on my life overall. Strong feelings of low moods and anxiousness have had a detrimental impact on my ability to focus on my studies, work life and personal life. One year ago, it became clear that the stalking was going to persist and as a result extended my feelings of depression."
– Stalking Survivor

Clients experiencing stalking may purposefully isolate themselves—physically and/or emotionally—from friends and family to mitigate the impact of the stalking on themselves and their loved ones. The client may be reluctant to involve people they know out of embarrassment or shame. They may also fear the stalker will target their loved ones. They may be afraid that the stalker will harm someone they care about and/or be unsure who to trust, as stalkers often manipulate mutual acquaintances. In addition, they may be unsure about the safety of the technology they use to communicate with their support network. Mental health professionals must create space for clients experiencing stalking to think broadly about whom they trust and how to safely communicate with their support system about their situation.

"I felt totally isolated. I didn't share my experience with anyone. Whenever I imagined telling people what was happening and how nervous he was making me feel, I pictured them dismissing me as dramatic."
– Stalking Survivor

Making Referrals

Building meaningful relationships with local partners is critical. Determine appropriate local resources where you can confidently make referrals, and ensure you have a thorough understanding of any services you refer clients to. This includes knowing eligibility requirements, such as required documentation, hours of operation, service locations, and the specific types of support they offer.

Also consider practical factors such as the availability of childcare, transportation options, costs, accepted insurance plans, and the organization's language capacity or access to translation services. Regularly review and update this information to ensure referrals are accurate, relevant, and accessible to the clients you serve. Recognize that due to waitlists, referrals to multiple organizations offering similar services might be necessary. Mental health professionals can make referrals to specialized resources like victim advocacy services, legal aid, crisis centers, housing support, or law enforcement contacts, ensuring clients have access to comprehensive support beyond the mental health setting.

Informed written consent is required to share any information about a client, including history of accessing treatment or services, as well as past or current experiences. Ask the client if they are willing to sign a release of information (ROI) to allow you to communicate with other providers if needed. Explain that the purpose of the ROI is to help support them more effectively through building a coordinated care team. Clearly outline the type of information you may share with the service provider or organization, what information they may share with you, and whether the release applies only to the referral process or permits ongoing communication. Inform the client that the ROI is entirely voluntary and that they can modify or revoke it at any time. Even with informed written consent, information should only be shared on a "need to know" basis. The written consent to release information should include, at minimum:[8]

- What information will be shared
- Who is authorized to release this information
- To whom it can be released
- For what purpose will the information be shared
- The dates during which the consent to share information is valid
- How consent can be revoked

Victim Service Agencies

Community-based domestic violence and sexual assault service organizations—agencies that are nonprofit programs not based in the criminal justice system—are often the best place for clients experiencing stalking to start receiving ongoing victim services. Even if the stalker is not a current or former intimate partner (for example, the stalker is a neighbor, estranged friend, or stranger), many domestic violence service providers will work with all people experiencing stalking, regardless of their relationship to the stalker. People experiencing stalking are usually eligible for the same services and resources as people who experience domestic violence (especially federally- and state-funded services).

Community-based advocacy services are available to your client regardless of whether they choose to pursue a report to the criminal justice system, and community-based advocates also have confidentiality privileges. Local victim advocates can help clients plan for safety, discuss legal options, and connect clients with additional services. The criminal and civil justice systems frequently rely on people who experience stalking to collect their own evidence and explain why their situations meet the threshold of stalking, and victim advocates can help clients do this. They can discuss the differences between pursuing criminal stalking charges and petitioning for a civil protection order, how these systems overlap and intersect, what information is and is not confidential, when the client may come into contact with the stalker, and what information may be shared with the stalker at different points in the legal process.

- Ask your local partners what services they do and do not provide for people experiencing stalking before referring clients.
- Victim Connect, the DV Hotline, and RAINN are national hotlines that can also make local referrals.

Community-based victim service agencies are different than victim-witness coordinators/systems-based advocates who work in law enforcement or prosecution agencies. System-based advocacy is not available in every agency, but where it exists, it may be a possibility for your client to work with a system-based individual in making a criminal report, and these individuals can advocate on behalf of your client during the criminal justice process. The level of confidentiality with systems-based advocates is not the same as with community-based advocates, so it is important to be aware of these differences, what information systems-based advocates are required to share with law enforcement or prosecutors, and how long these programs are able to work with an individual.

Law Enforcement

Mental health professionals can help clients think about whether they want to report stalking to law enforcement and how to stay safe if they choose to report. While reporting to law enforcement often seems to outsiders like an obvious step to stop a stalker's behavior and hold them accountable, a client may not feel safe reporting the crime. Sometimes, reporting stalking can cause the stalker to escalate their behavior, increasing the danger to your client. Often, people who are stalked try to deal with the stalking situation on their own before reporting to law enforcement or seeking help from victim services; they often only report when they feel it has gotten out of control.

If a client decides to report to the police, mental health professionals can support their decision by helping them understand what to expect. You can help your clients be ready to:

- Answer specific and intimate questions from law enforcement officers, such as, "Does the stalking cause you to feel fear?"
- Identify incidents that the law enforcement officer is likely to accept demonstrate a course of conduct.
- Outline the events clearly and concisely.
- Explain the context of the incidents to show they make up a pattern, who the client thinks is behind the incidents, how they make the client feel, and the changes they have made to their life because of the incidents.
- Bring documentation and evidence of the stalking, such as a stalking incident log, while also considering that the stalker may have access to everything the victim shares with law enforcement.
- Understand that law enforcement may or may not arrest the stalker.
- Remember that investigations can take a long time.
- Considering how the stalker may react if they learn about the client's report, including different scenarios (e.g., if the stalker finds out about the police report from law enforcement contacting them or from a mutual friend).

Mental health professionals should be prepared to support clients who engage with the criminal or civil legal system throughout the process, which can be both extensive and exhausting. Other responders involved in the process, including law enforcement, attorneys, and judicial officers, may not be trauma-informed and may minimize or dismiss your client's feelings and experience. Your client may not achieve the desired result at the end of the process, and the offender may or may not be held accountable. In the case that the system does hold the stalker accountable, your client may experience negative feelings about the outcomes, even if desired. Additionally, clients may experience fear in anticipation of when a protection order expires or of when the stalker is released from custody or probation. Mental health professionals can help clients process difficult emotions as they arise in response to engaging with legal systems. Additionally, the victim service agencies outlined above can assist a client in making a report to law enforcement, provide information about what to expect when doing so, and support the client throughout the process.

"When he was charged, I was so relieved but also felt so guilty and felt like I had to tell people he wasn't a bad guy even after everything he had done to me."
– Stalking Survivor

Culturally-Specific Services

Referrals to culturally-specific services are essential for clients experiencing stalking because they provide support grounded in an understanding of the client's cultural background, values, and lived experiences. Stalking is experienced and interpreted differently across cultures, and responses to it—such as seeking help from law enforcement or mental health professionals—can be shaped by cultural norms, historical trauma, language barriers, and mistrust of institutions. Culturally-specific organizations are better equipped to offer services in a client's preferred language, navigate community dynamics, and approach safety planning in ways that are respectful and relevant. These resources can help reduce isolation, validate experiences that mainstream services may overlook, and increase a client's sense of trust, safety, and empowerment. Mental health professionals can ensure more equitable, accessible, and effective care for clients experiencing stalking by connecting them with culturally-specific supports. To learn more about how stalking impacts specific populations in unique ways, check out SPARC's Stalking and Specific Populations Resources.

"When you're in crisis and you're going for help and you're doing all these other things – code-switching is exhausting, and you're doing it so that the helpers can help you, but you have to make the helpers feel safe. That's what we're talking about when we're talking about culturally-specific services... We're trying to cut down on some of the barriers to safety, some of the barriers to trust. This automatic 'you get me' so I'm going to start the conversation from D instead of from A."
– Culturally-Specific Service Provider

Assessing Risk

Assessing risk is essential for identifying potential impacts and for safety planning with clients experiencing stalking. While mental health professionals may be proficient in assessing risk that a client presents to themselves or others, it is also important to consider the risk a client experiencing stalking is facing from the stalker. Mental health professionals who are equipped to assess the risk of violence should consider the following unique factors when supporting an individual who is experiencing stalking.

Risk of Continued or Recurrent Stalking

People experiencing stalking often struggle with the uncertainty and anticipatory fear associated with whether the abuse will ever end or, if it has stopped, whether it might happen again.

"I wrote my own will because, as far as I was concerned, this would continue until one of us died."
– Stalking Survivor

Risk factors that indicate the stalking will continue, or, if it has stopped, will reoccur include:[9]

- The client is being stalked by a former intimate partner
- The stalker has a history of abuse and violence towards the client
- The longer the duration and the greater the intensity and frequency of stalking behaviors, the greater the risk of continued stalking
- Any factor that reinforces contact between the client and stalker, in particular shared custody of children, or a shared work or living environment (e.g., neighbor stalking)
- The stalker uses third parties to monitor, contact, harass, threaten, intimidate, or harm the person they are stalking, referred to as stalking by proxy

Risk of Psychological and Social Harm

Stalking inflicts significant psychological and social harm due to the ongoing fear and intimidation experienced by people who are stalked, even when no physical violence occurs. The psychological harms previously discussed can lead to and/or co-exist with social damage, including social isolation, time off work, and relocation. In addition, self-protective measures may be necessary for the client's safety while also exacerbating psychological distress and social damage. Risk factors that indicate the client will suffer significant psychological and/or social damage, which may include suicidal ideation or behavior, include:[10]

- Clients who are repeatedly followed by the stalker
- Clients who experience property theft or destruction
- Clients who are stalked by an intimate partner (current or former) who has access to firearms
- Clients who are explicitly threatened, particularly threats with firearms, regardless of the presence of violence
- Clients who experience physical violence
- Clients who experience longer durations and greater intensity and frequency of stalking behaviors

Risk of Threats and Violence

Stalking often co-occurs with other forms of violence, including physical assault, sexual assault, and homicide. As such, violence risk assessments are an important tool to gauge the level of risk, threat, and/or physical danger posed by the stalker to the client at a particular point in time. The Stalking & Harassment Assessment & Risk Profile (SHARP) is a free, online assessment specifically designed to examine and assess risk in a stalking situation. Due to the sensitive and possibly triggering nature of the assessment questions, it is advised that the client complete the SHARP with a support system present, rather than on their own. Mental health professionals can utilize the SHARP with clients experiencing stalking to identify potential risk factors and safety plan accordingly.

All stalkers can be dangerous and may escalate at any time. Risk factors that are associated with a higher likelihood of violence towards the client and/or others close to the client include:[11]

- The client is stalked by an intimate partner (current or former)
- The stalker frequently approaches the client in-person
- The stalker explicitly threatens the client
- There is an escalation in the stalker's behavior
- The stalker has a history of abuse and violence towards the client and/or others
- The stalker has a criminal history
- The stalker has access to weapons, particularly firearms
- This stalker has a history of substance abuse
- The stalker has experience/expertise with technology
- The stalker has a history of being controlling and/or jealous towards the client
- The stalker blames the client, wants revenge, and/or does not care about severe consequences (such as going to jail or dying)
- The stalker uses third parties to monitor, contact, harass, threaten, intimidate, or harm the person they are stalking, referred to as stalking by proxy
- The longer the duration and the greater the intensity and frequency of stalking behaviors, the greater the risk of harm

The most dangerous times for a person being stalked are when:

- They have separated from the stalker
- The stalker has been arrested or served with a protection order
- The stalker has a major negative life event, such as the loss of a job or being evicted
- The stalking behaviors increase in frequency or escalate in severity

Mental health professionals should also consider making a referral to local victim advocates or law enforcement officers who are prepared to do risk, danger, and threat assessments with people who are being stalked. It is imperative that local resources be identified and partnerships be made so mental health professionals can offer a warm hand-off if a client needs to utilize outside resources or support.

Safety Planning

Safety planning is a combination of suggestions, concrete steps, and strategic responses designed to decrease risks to the person being stalked and increase their physical and emotional safety during specific situations. Safety planning is different for every person experiencing stalking— tailored to their unique circumstances—and every stalker will respond differently to those safety tactics. It is

important to keep in mind—and communicate to the client—that safety planning does not guarantee safety, but it can greatly increase safety and decrease risk. Mental health professionals who have not received training in safety planning can do so through local and national advocacy organizations and training providers. Additionally, mental health professionals should also consider making a referral to a victim advocate who is prepared to safety plan with people experiencing stalking, as safety planning is generally a part of victim advocate training and expertise.

"The psychological ramifications of being harassed multiple times and not having a way to defend yourself, not having a way to stop the harassment, not having control to provide yourself safety is debilitating.
– Stalking Survivor

Safety planning considers the client's current situation, as well as possibilities of what the stalker might do next, and plans ahead for actions your client can take to reduce their own risk and the potential for harm. To safety plan into the future as far as possible, it is vital to work backward from a moment of harm that has previously occurred and work with the client to identify any potential warning signs that may help predict harm is imminent. It's also a vital part of safety planning to consider how the stalker might react to changes your client makes. Part of creating a safety plan is working with your client to prepare themselves to carry it out to the best of their abilities, to rehearse the steps with them, and to identify trusted people they can share the plan with for help executing it.

Effective safety planning is:

- **Flexible:** Many options are available for any given scenario. Your client can evaluate which option best fits their current situation. The planning should be adjusted as the stalker's behavior changes.
- **Comprehensive:** Safety planning considers every aspect of the client's life, including family and friends, children, school, work, and daily routine.
- **Contextual:** The planning should account both for what the client is currently experiencing, for the pattern of previous behavior, and for what the client thinks the stalker may do in the future.

To help clients safety plan effectively, mental health professionals can:

- Listen and ask questions non-judgmentally
- Help identify the client's specific needs and goals
- Discuss and analyze risks
- Explore strategies and resources
- Provide information and options
- Provide resources for your client to access at any time, such as a 24-hour hotline:

- Check for local resources first.
- If there are no local 24-hour hotlines in your area:
  - National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 or chat online here https://www.thehotline.org.
  - National Sexual Assault Hotline (RAINN): 1-800-656-4673 or chat online here https://hotline.rainn.org/online.
  - VictimConnect Resource Center can assist with safety planning and resources for people experiencing stalking: 1-855-484-2846 or chat online here https://chat.victimsofcrime.org/victim-connect/.

See SPARC's Stalking Safety Strategies resource for more information on safety planning.

Disengagement

> ***"If you've never been in a predator-type situation, it's better to know where they're at than not know. The reason I didn't block him was to help not being caught off-guard."***
> ***-Stalking Victim***

Criminal justice responders often tell people who are being stalked to completely disengage and cease contact with the stalker. This can be helpful, as some stalkers are encouraged by *any* contact or response, and contact may reinforce their behavior, even if the interaction is negative. It may be best for your client to let every call from the stalker go to voicemail rather than to answer and ask the stalker to stop calling. The stalker may see this contact as evidence that their methods have been successful, rather than a rejection. It is also critical to recognize that the client's attempts to distance themselves from their stalker may frustrate or anger the stalker. Stalkers often escalate their behavior when the person they are stalking disengages with them in some way, and this may lead to an increase in the physical threat to the client's well-being. For example, if your client blocks the stalker's phone number, they may show up in person at the client's home.

Oftentimes, complete disengagement is neither possible nor likely. Some clients experiencing stalking may have to maintain contact because they share friends or family with the stalker, they work together, or they share custody of minor children. Clients may want to keep in contact with the stalker in order to stay up-to-date on where the stalker is, what they are doing, and how they are feeling, so that the client is not caught off-guard by the stalker's behaviors. For example, your client may answer a phone call from the stalker to ward off an escalation in behavior, such as the stalker showing up at the client's house. In rural areas or tight-knit communities with limited geographic space and/or shared social circles (such as college or university campuses, military service members and their families, LGBTQ+ communities, or Native American communities), social norms and cultural expectations often create strong emotional and geographic ties to the community, often

making it difficult to avoid the stalker or leave the community. Complete disengagement may also be impossible if the stalker is in a position of authority or power over the client, such as a supervisor, community leader, law enforcement officer, or someone with authority over them at work, at school, in the community, in the government, or in their family.

Emotional Safety Planning

Mental health professionals can help clients plan for emotional safety through triggering or traumatizing situations, such as receiving contact from the stalker, seeing the stalker, or being reminded of the stalker. Healing from trauma takes time, and the impacts can be long-lasting. Negative thoughts and emotions, flashbacks, nightmares, and other mental health impacts can arise at any time, and they may come back after periods of not experiencing them for a while.

Mental health professionals can help clients plan for emotional safety by:

- Helping the client identify triggers that increase trauma reactions
- Helping the client recognize the signs that they are experiencing a traumatic trigger
- Mapping the client's mental and physical reactions to trauma triggers
- Identifying grounding techniques the client can use when experiencing high anxiety to bring themselves back to the present
- Practicing coping strategies for dealing with traumatic situations, such as having to engage with the stalker
- Identifying self-care practices to help recover after emotional distress
- Identifying people in the client's social network who they can reach out to who will provide emotional support

Emotional safety planning can help remind clients how to take care of themselves during and after stressful, triggering, or traumatic situations. When people are in crisis, they often cannot access their normal coping mechanisms. Managing negative emotional reactions during stressful situations becomes more attainable when there are clear plans, resources, and supports in place that your client can easily access. Planning for emotional safety in advance provides a clear framework for maintaining stability and resilience during times of crisis.

Financial Safety Planning

Financial abuse is often part of a stalker's pattern of behavior, particularly with intimate partner stalkers. Examples of financial abuse include:[12]

- Controlling how the client's money is spent
- Making all the client's financial decisions
- Withholding money from the client or 'giving them an allowance'

- Not allowing the client to work, earn money, or go to school, including forbidding or sabotaging these efforts
- Forcing the client to work in an industry or location where they do not want to work
- Withholding basic living resources, including medication, food, etc., from the client
- Stealing the client's money, identity, credit, property, etc., including forcing them to sign over assets or fraudulent legal or tax documents
- Destroying the client's credit or credibility, including overusing their credit or reporting that they are 'cheating' to the public benefits office

Planning for financial safety is part of holistic safety planning with clients experiencing stalking. The National Network to End Domestic Violence provides financial safety planning guidance for domestic violence cases that can be utilized with clients experiencing stalking. Additionally, mental health professionals should also consider making a referral to a victim advocate who is well-versed in financial safety planning for additional support.

Support System

For most people experiencing stalking, having a support system they can trust and rely on is essential to their ability to cope with the ongoing situation and fear of what the stalker might do in the future—even if months or years have gone by. Social support has also been shown to mitigate the negative effects of trauma in people who have been stalked. [13] Mental health professionals can help clients experiencing stalking think broadly about who in their network can provide that support. Some clients may want to consider implementing a daily safety check with a member of their support system; this can be as simple as a text message every day letting the person know they are okay. This support person may be someone well-known to your client, a casual acquaintance, or a professional contact, including:

- Family members, such as siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles
- Friends
- Neighbors
- Members of their house of worship
- Members of other affiliated, community, or professional groups
- Coworkers
- Medical or legal professionals
- Victim advocates

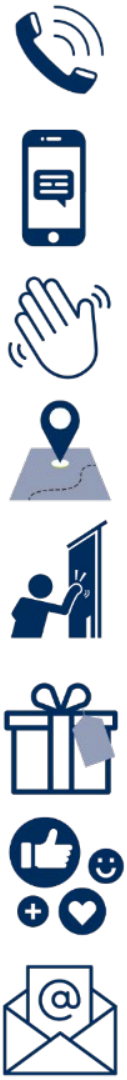
For some clients, this exercise may be challenging. They may wish to keep people safe by not involving them, or they may be reluctant to trust anyone, especially if the stalker knows their friends and family.

Documenting Stalking Behaviors

Encourage clients experiencing stalking to document all stalking behaviors and preserve any evidence, such as emails, text messages, or gifts—even if they do not intend to move forward with criminal charges. If your client decides to report the stalking to law enforcement or apply for a protective order, this documentation is an important component of demonstrating the course of conduct. It also provides your client, service providers, and law enforcement officers with an overview of the stalking behaviors and a timeline so they can identify any escalation and recognize the true scope of behaviors. A sample stalking log is available here.

To stay safe while documenting behaviors, consider the following with your client:

- **Digital documentation:** Is the computer/phone safe from the stalker? Do they ever have access to the physical device? How likely is it that the stalker has installed spyware on the device to gain access to all of the documents, websites, emails, and other information your client is using? Does the stalker have access to specific apps or accounts, like the notes app, email, or cloud storage where the client might save information and evidence?
- **Paper documentation:** Can several copies be stored in different places that the stalker cannot access? These locations could be a friend or family member's house, your client's workplace, a sports locker, or a safety deposit box. Does the client have the capacity to update multiple copies?



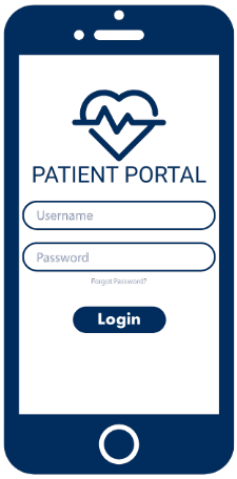
Documentation should include:

- Date and time of incident
- Location of incident, which for technology-facilitated stalking behaviors includes both the technology used (phone or computer, specific app, etc.) and physical location where the client was when they accessed or noticed the incident
- Full names and contact information of any witnesses
- What agency and person the client reported to (if they reported the incident to any authorities) and the incident number if a police report was taken
- Brief description of what happened

Some clients may be reluctant to document stalking behaviors. They may feel unsafe or find the process upsetting. Be sure to discuss with clients that any documentation or evidence they provide to law enforcement or for a civil protection order petition will be accessible to the stalker. Clients should not include any information that they do not want the stalker to access, such as the emotional impact or level of fear the behaviors caused. Clients are unlikely to forget how a particular incident made them feel, whereas they may forget the date, time, or witnesses if they don't document those details.

Addressing Potential Privacy Concerns

While privacy and confidentiality are critical and well-regulated for all clients, mental health professionals need to be especially vigilant about protecting the privacy and confidentiality of clients experiencing stalking. Accessed information—especially their location, the fact that they are seeking treatment, or the disclosure of abuse—can increase danger for the client. Stalkers may attempt to impersonate clients to gain access to private health information, so implementing verification procedures before sharing any details or altering care plans is best practice. This includes establishing clear protocols, such as requiring a predetermined code word for any appointment changes, to prevent stalkers from tampering with a client's treatment. Additionally, mental health professionals must take steps to ensure that virtual sessions are conducted in secure environments. Clients should be encouraged to use devices and locations that the stalker does not have access to, as stalkers may attempt to monitor therapy sessions through a monitored device, shared or compromised accounts, or physical surveillance. If there is an electronic health record that is easily accessible via the internet or mobile device, or if health record updates are automatically sent via text or email, be sure to assist your client in securing their health information.



Case Notes and Mental Health Records

Mental health professionals' documentation practices can impact the safety and well-being of clients experiencing stalking, and providers should review confidentiality policies and the limits of confidentiality with clients. Intimate partner stalkers who seek to threaten and control their partners may attempt to access health records via a subpoena. Records may be used to threaten, harm, or undermine your client's credibility during a court case. For example, if child custody is an issue in the case, the stalker may use information about diagnoses and medication to characterize your client as an unsuitable parent. Limit documentation to what is essentially required for billing or other purposes, and do not include unnecessary details. For further guidance, the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health provides suggestions for documenting domestic violence in mental health records that can be used when documenting stalking in mental health records as well.

Provider Safety

Mental health professionals themselves should also be aware of their own safety and the safety of their staff. Stalkers may target mental health professionals and/or administrative staff in an effort to obtain information about the client or alter their care plans. Stalkers may also target providers and staff to derail the support they are providing to the client. Establishing safety procedures and training staff on how to respond to suspicious requests and harassing behavior can help ensure the safety of all involved in the client's care.

Conclusion / Practical Takeaways

Stalking is a serious form of violence that is often misunderstood and minimized. Mental health professionals can help support clients experiencing stalking improve their mental health and keep them safer by understanding the impacts, assessing risk, safety planning, and making the appropriate referrals. To learn more about stalking, visit StalkingAwareness.org. Contact SPARC at tta@stalkingawareness.org with questions, concerns, or requests for technical assistance on responding to survivors of stalking. While SPARC resources can help mental health professionals, other professionals, and survivors learn more about stalking, SPARC does not provide direct services to victims and survivors of stalking. The resources below may be particularly useful for mental health professionals:

- Tools to help identify stalking
- Short Handbook for Stalking Victims (available in 10 languages)
- Stalking Incident & Behavior Log (available in 10 languages)
- Safety Planning Strategies for Stalking Survivors
- Stalking's intersections with specific victimizations and specific populations

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