



by Vicki Salemi

STALKING

on Campus

Sure, college is an awesome place to make new friends. Between classes, residence life, sports, and social activities, you're going to meet tons of new people. But what happens if someone invades your space and takes things too far? We talked to students about their real-life stalking situations and got their advice on what to do if it happens to you or your friends. (Yes, it happens to guys, too.)

* Names have been changed.

Lori's* trouble began while waiting on line with her friend Cami* in the dining hall of their New England college. After seeing their names displayed on their campus IDs, a stranger struck up an e-mail friendship with Cami, nonchalantly asking personal questions about Lori.

While Lori studied abroad the next semester, she was unaware of the blossoming "friendship" between Cami and the alleged stalker. She returned to campus, however, to find threatening e-mails in her inbox.

Shocked and frightened, Lori printed the e-mails and approached campus police. "I was overwhelmed, and I felt violated," she explains. Wondering if this stranger knew her schedule, Lori questioned her safety. Eventually the alleged stalker was psychologically evaluated in a hearing, which concluded that he needed to leave the school on his own. He did not return to campus the following year.

Even though he continued to reach out to Cami, by then she knew better than to respond. Turns out Cami could have stopped the situation when she received his initial e-mails by approaching her residence advisor or another authority on campus.

Above all, Lori advises, "If something even feels somewhat wrong, go with your instincts. Bounce it off your advisor or an authority figure."

THE SAFETY CHICK

Kathleen Baty, author of "A Girl's Gotta Do What a Girl's Gotta Do: The Ultimate Guide to Living Safe and Smart" (Rodale Press, 2003), agrees. Baty survived a kidnap attempt at knifepoint by an obsessive stalker, and now shares her story to help change the law and empower people to live safely.

"Be aware of your surroundings and listen to your gut," she says. "If someone causes the hair on the back of your neck to stand up, or just gives you the 'willies,' that might be a signal that something is amiss or someone could be trouble."

Her campus safety tips? "Whether you're out on the town or coming back from studying at night, always have a buddy," she continues. "Make plans with your roommate, friend, or campus security to get home safely." And don't forget the basics: Lock all your doors and windows at night.

CYBERSTALKING

Unfortunately, in the online world, protecting yourself isn't as simple as locking your doors. As Lori's situation illustrated, threatening e-mails are the most common form of cyberstalking, state Dr. John Nicoletti and Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas, authors of "Violence Goes to College" (Charles C. Thomas, 2001). In fact, they say, cyberstalkers usually aren't strangers – four out of five campus victims know their stalkers through previous relationships (boyfriend/girlfriend, classmate, co-worker, acquaintance).

Whether it's through chat rooms, instant messaging, e-mails, or Web sites, Spencer-Thomas, a psychologist and director of behavioral health promotion at Regis University (Denver, CO), advises you keep your guard up while surfing the Net.

"Stalking on our campuses takes many forms, with varied targets and means, but with one goal – to intimidate the victim," Spencer-Thomas says. While cyberstalking victims who report crimes are primarily female, the number of male victims is on the rise.

BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

Since the majority of cyberstalkers are former boyfriends or girlfriends, is it possible that by sending one too many e-mails begging your ex to take you back, you could qualify as a stalker?

Jeffrey Haugaard, clinical psychologist and associate professor of human development at Cornell University (Ithaca, NY), wanted to find out just that. He conducted research with college students who had a romantic relationship lasting at least one month in which one person wanted it to end and the other didn't. Of the students surveyed, 20 percent were stalked; about an equal number of guys and girls reported they initiated stalking after their ex broke up with them. The questionable behavior ranged from leaving countless voicemails to more threatening gestures like following the person around campus.

Haugaard concluded males and females seemed as likely to both initiate and be the target of stalking at the end of a relationship. His advice is to establish firm boundaries. "The person breaking up needs to set clear and reasonable limits on the contact the ex can have, and then follow those limits," he advises. Afterward, he recommends keeping records of any inappropriate e-mails and voicemails.

And, he says, talking with parents, counseling center reps, or law enforcement officials is important if unwanted contact continues. According to the National College Women Victimization Study (2000), even though 93.4 percent of victims confide in someone – most often a friend – 83.1 percent of stalking incidents are not reported to police or campus law enforcement.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

The more aware you are, the better off you'll be. A program at Tufts University (Medford, MA), "In the SACK" (Safety, Awareness, Consent, and Knowledge), educates first-year students about how to recognize stalking behaviors.

"The goal is to educate both men and women during their first week at Tufts," says Peggy Barrett, director of the school's women's center. "The campus environment lends itself to a false sense of trust, where students live in close quarters."

In fact, Tufts is serious about cracking down on stalkers. In 2004, the school initiated a university-wide policy to not tolerate stalking through mail, phone, e-mail, Internet communication, or fax. In Massachusetts, stalking and cyberstalking are felonies.

Erika Gerber, a Tufts senior, is an "In the SACK" volunteer who talks to small groups of girls after the program to answer any questions. "College is teeming with opportunity, and awareness helps students make the right choices so they make the most out of their college experience," she notes.

Efrain Ortega, also a Tufts senior, echoes that sentiment. As a guy involved in the program, he provides a different perspective. "In my experiences, a huge negative factor was ignorance; people just didn't know what to do or how to deal with the problem," he says. "Educating incoming freshmen takes a huge step to correct that problem and raise awareness." In fact, Efrain says many guys are very responsive and come to him throughout the year to ask questions.

BE STRONG

As Cheryl Darisse knows, victims have rights and can survive. Unfortunately, her sister didn't survive her stalker's attack. Sandy was a waitress whose stalker kept staring at her and asking her out. He eventually murdered her via a package bomb.

Feeling empowered to change the law, help victims, and support them through an organization called Feel Safe Again, Cheryl sends a powerful message: "If you ever need immediate emergency assistance, please call 911!"

Though you don't want to be paranoid, remember to be smart and aware at all times. "Most victims tend to feel completely helpless at first due to fear," Cheryl notes. "Once they receive information and support services, they are more empowered and want to do whatever they can to prevent what happened to them from happening to anyone else. They become survivors." ☺

WHAT IS STALKING?

Stalking is defined as threats along with repeated harassing behavior such as:

- following a person;
- appearing at a person's home, class, or work;
- making harassing phone calls or e-mails;
- leaving written messages or objects;
- or vandalizing a person's property.

Source: *StalkingBehavior.com*

COMMON STALKING MYTHS:

- It only happens to celebrities.
- Just ignore them and they'll go away.
- It's all in your head.
- You're just overreacting.

Source: *FeelSafeAgain.org*

IF YOU THINK YOU'RE BEING STALKED...

- Make it clear to the stalker that you want no further contact from him/her of any kind. You can do that on the phone, face-to-face, or whatever way makes you feel secure.
- If the behavior persists, you can tell the police that you made your intentions clear.
- Save all evidence – letters, voicemails, e-mails, etc.
- File a police report.
- Listen to your gut – it's better to be safe than sorry!

Source: *SafetyChick.com*

ONLINE SAFETY TIPS:

- Pick a username that does not reveal your last name, gender, age, or location.
- Do not fill out profiles with real details.
- Do not assume people in chat rooms or on e-mail lists are telling you the truth.
- Do not disclose personal information.

Source: "Violence Goes to College" (Charles C. Thomas, 2001)