

## **WHAT IS CYBERSTALKING?**

Cyberstalking is an Internet-related term that's used to describe someone who's stalking, threatening and/or harassing another person online. The person committing the act does it to intimate, and enjoys the control they feel they have over another person. To the victim, it can be traumatizing and frightening experience. Often, when this term is used to describe a person, it relates to continuous acts.

## **WHAT IS ELECTRONIC HARASSMENT OR THREATS?**

Electronic harassment may occur in a variety of forms. It can include sending offensive material or threats through company or private email, posting another individual's private information on the World Wide Web, or attacking another's computer through elaborate methods. One such common attack is called "email bombs," where a massive amount of junk mail is sent to a person in an attempt to crash their computer.

Threatening or harassing messages aren't limited to e-mail messages. While email is a common method of sending threats or harassing messages, Internet technologies provide new methods for criminal activities. A person may also receive such messages through IRC (Internet Relay Chat), bulletin boards, Web pages, chat rooms, and online messaging systems.

## **IT ISN'T A PRANK**

Threatening or harassing email should never be excused as a prank. Although it is rare for a person's behavior on the Internet to spill over into the real world, threats should always be taken seriously. It is dangerous to dismiss threatening email, believing the threats will never be acted upon. Even a slim chance of being hurt should be considered too risky to ignore. Remember that threatening or harassing someone through email is just as illegal as doing so in an offline form.

## **WHO IS AT RISK?**

Women and children are most often the victims electronic harassment, threats, and stalking. A cyberstalker may view a woman's picture and information online, in dating or companionship ads. Women and children may also be targeted through chat rooms or Web sites, which may provide a significant amount of

information and scanned photographs. The potential victim may also be persuaded into sending photos and personal information to the cyberstalker.

Although women and children are most often the prime targets, anyone who uses the Internet can become a victim of electronic harassment. If you receive email or interact with others on the Internet, then a degree of risk exists that someone may harass or threaten you online. It can happen to anyone, regardless of race, sex, religious background, etc.

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

Protecting yourself on the Internet should begin by trying to keep any information about yourself confidential. You should avoid giving out more information than necessary, and never tell someone highly personal information, including:

- The full name(s) of you and/or your children
- Your home address
- The name and address of the company where you work
- The school that you or your children study at
- Your phone number (for home or work)

Providing such information will allow any harassment and threats you receive to become physical or verbal. By not disclosing this information, there is a low risk that the person will call or visit you.

Be aware that while you're being honest about yourself, the others you're communicating with over the Internet may not be telling the truth about themselves. For example, an adult may pretend to be a child, while chatting or sending messages to children or teens. This deception is done to make the victim feel at ease, and promote a kinship with you. By making you feel that the two of you have things in common, there is a greater chance that you'll be willing to exchange photos and/or information.

If you don't wish to receive electronic messages from someone, then send the person a message saying that you don't wish them to send any additional messages or contact you in any way. This will let the person know that you didn't appreciate their behavior, and give them the chance to stop. In most cases, this will be enough, and the person will stop sending you messages. If you continue receiving other harassing messages or threats, then don't reply to them. Instead, consider contacting the police.

If you receive any messages that make you uncomfortable, (through email, chat, etc.), but don't feel threatened or the need to call the police, it is possible to block that person from sending you any other messages. Many email, chat, and

message programs allow you to filter messages or add certain people to an ignore list. Such features block a person from contacting you.

Companies should create corporate email policies, which outline the proper behavior when sending electronic mail internally and to users of the Internet. Such policies should provide clear guidelines of what constitutes as improper actions (e.g. sending threats, consistently sending messages to someone who doesn't want to correspond with you, or sending pornography or other material that may be considered offensive). Your company should also stress that such actions will not be tolerated, and what the company may do in retaliation (such as termination of the person's employment).

### **DON'T DESTROY THE EVIDENCE**

Any threatening or harassing email should not be deleted. Remember that this is the evidence that may be used to find and convict the person sending these messages.

Make note of the user's email address or other information, and print out copies of messages previously sent to you. Contact the police, and provide these messages and information to the police. Keep the email on your machine, and do not delete them, as police may wish to analyze them for further information.