

January 20, 2026

This piece is part of The Onion Madder Archives

The Long-Term Harm of Stalking

Stalking isn't just someone following you: it's what happens after, and after, and after

Introduction

Stalking is often misunderstood because it resists clean narratives. It is not always visible, not always direct, and not always recognizable as violence in the moment. Popular awareness tends to flatten it into a single image-someone being followed, watched, or confronted-when in reality stalking is more often a process: sustained, adaptive, and social.

In the age of the internet, stalking rarely looks like one person and one victim. It unfolds through networks, platforms, and institutions. Narratives are seeded, concern is weaponized, and third parties are pulled in long before the target understands what is happening. By the time the harm becomes legible, reputations may already be damaged, relationships strained, and systems quietly set in motion. Silence is frequently mistaken for resolution. Withdrawal is framed as disengagement or healing, rather than what it often is: an attempt to survive ongoing pressure without escalating risk. But stalking does not require proximity to persist. It thrives on plausible deniability, indirect contact, and social reinforcement-and it often continues whether the target speaks or not.

This article examines stalking not as a series of isolated incidents, but as a long-term pattern of coercion that produces social, psychological, and physical fallout. Understanding that pattern is

essential-not only for recognizing harm, but for responding to it without reinforcing the very dynamics that allow it to continue.

What Stalking Actually Looks Like

It doesn't always look like someone outside your house.

While stalking can show up as a myriad of behaviors, in the age of social media it increasingly looks like coordinated harassment initiated through the internet and laundered into real life. It looks like anonymous or pseudonymous posts circulating on platforms like image boards, forums, or social media; content about you being reframed, reposted, or monetized for engagement, reputations quickly shifting, people "having concerns", social circles closing ranks, or even institutional involvement. Online stalking thrives in spaces designed to reward outrage, speculation, and dehumanization. Social media platforms such as 4chan, Kiwi Farms, and Twitter/X allow narratives to metastasize rapidly-especially in a polarized political climate where harassment is often reframed as "commentary," "participation," or "awareness."

Content monetization plays a quiet but significant role. When attention becomes currency, escalation is incentivized. Misrepresentation, exaggeration, and hostile framing generate clicks, reposts, and validation-often with no regard for the real person on the receiving end.

What begins as online harassment rarely stays online. It spills into real-world consequences like: coordinated reporting campaigns, false or exaggerated police reports, SWATting and welfare checks used as intimidation, weaponized restraining orders, and institutional actions taken at face value without verification.

This form of stalking thrives when it is plausibly deniable. Each individual action can be framed as concern, coincidence, or civic participation-while the cumulative effect is isolation, fear, and reputational harm.

The danger is not just the behavior itself, but how easily it is absorbed into existing systems that assume good faith, even when the pattern clearly indicates abuse.

Abuse by Triangulation

Poisoning the well.

Stalking doesn't always target the victim directly. Sometimes third parties are contacted, narratives are seeded, and concern is weaponized. By the time you realize what's happening, the room is already tilted.

The contact is indirect: employers, friends, family members, organizations. Rarely accusation. Mostly implication. Just enough context to change how you're perceived without saying anything that can be challenged.

Abuse survives scrutiny through plausible deniability. It hides behind phrases like "I was trying to help," "I was concerned," or "people deserved to know." Each statement sounds reasonable on its own. Together, they reshape reality.

This kind of harm doesn't require access to you and doesn't always leave obvious evidence. It works socially, not physically. And it disproportionately affects people who are already marginalized, disabled, or isolated-especially when difference is reframed as instability.

Social and Physical Fallout

Isolation isn't a side effect, it's a feature.

One of the most damaging parts of long-term stalking is social erosion. Friendships evaporate slowly or explode. The stress and stigma of supporting someone that is being publicly targeted can end relationships.

The humiliation and anxiety of social isolation combined with constant third party contact, direct abuse, or social media campaigns can trigger feelings of worthlessness or "I must have done something to deserve this", especially if the stalker is able to trigger a response with their abuse. The thrill of seeing their victim lash out becomes addictive, and "documenting" any reaction helps feed the next cycle of abuse.

But stalking doesn't stay in the public sphere. It enters your intimate relationships: your body, your desire, and your sense of safety during intimacy. Effects can include dissociation during sex, shame around being seen or wanted, or difficulty separating desire from threat. This is rarely acknowledged, and almost never treated.

What I Wish People Understood Sooner

There is no version of this that guarantees safety.

You can do everything "right" and still be harmed. You can stand up for yourself or you can disappear, and still be a victim. Compliance does not guarantee safety-it only changes the shape of the risk.

You can be calm, factual, restrained-and still be disbelieved. And if you refuse to be victimized quietly, demand accountability, or fail to perform credibility in the expected way, you can be reframed as the problem.

Stalking does not require obsession. It requires leverage, timing, and an audience willing to mistake control for credibility. Once that alignment exists, harm can continue without constant presence, intent, or escalation.

What Support Looks Like

And what it doesn't.

Support is not devil's advocacy, neutrality theater, or asking victims to soften their language to be credible.

Support is believing patterns, not just incidents; and understanding that reputational harm is real harm