

STANDING TOGETHER

Steering Clear Of Bullies Online

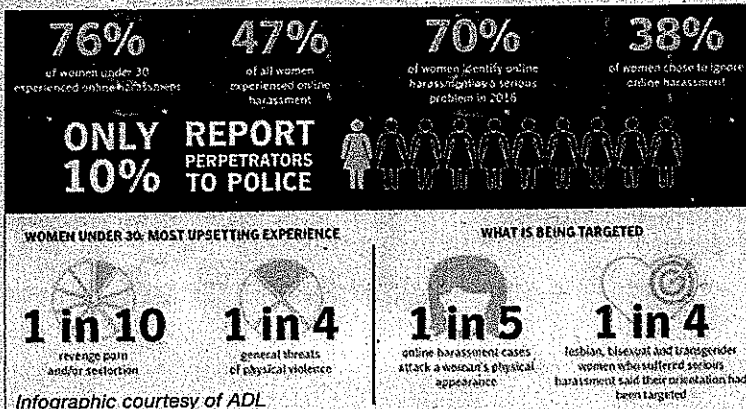
Part 1 of a two-part series on staying safe and avoiding cyberstalkers

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When most people think of stranger danger, harassment and bullying, they usually think of real life #MeToo examples on the street, at work, on college campuses or in the school cafeteria. Commonsense tells us the importance of taking precautions to avoid strangers and nasty coworkers, to maintain our privacy and passwords, and to lock our doors at night to stay safe and avoid people who may wish us harm.

But the situation is far more complicated when it comes to online bullying, which is a real and growing menace in our society. Unlike traditional face-to-face harassment, online bullying is free of time, location or bully-identifying limitations. Cyberbullying, aka cyberstalking, is the use of electronic communication to bully someone, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature. It is usually done anonymously, via text messaging or social media or other online forum. The victims and perpetrators are children and adults, male and female.

The perpetrator uses technology to intentionally and repeatedly mistreat the victim at all hours of the day and night. As the scourge proliferates, experts are learning that cyberbullying produces emotional and psychological harm on a level not seen with traditional bullying.



This is especially the case for young people, who spend vast amounts of time online, often communicating with complete strangers. Once a victim is targeted by a cyberbully, or a group of bullies, the abuse can be relentless and seemingly inescapable. Suicide is increasingly a way out for victims, as witnessed in dozens of tragic stories from all over the world.

Through in-depth studies of the issues surrounding mental health and modern-day challenges to individuals and families, I have realized that so many of today's societal problems are interrelated and have root causes.

Issues such as eating disorders, self-harm, drug and alcohol addiction, video-game obsessions, social anxiety, academic

and peer pressure, harassment and bullying are intertwined. Mental health problems, including anxiety, insomnia, depression and suicide, are often part of the larger picture. Solutions are out there, but mental health must be addressed on a community level at schools, by professionals, parents and upstanders.

Today's young people are the first generation to grow up with the Internet age and 24/7 social media, judging them and tweeting from all angles. Mature adults know that the Internet has some scary and dark corners, but we also know it can also be a place of vital information, connections and support.

For those who gain self-esteem from the validation they receive on social media, the experience can be like a video game. They navigate through daily challenges and compete for points and "likes" each time they go online (on average, 50 times per day). Every part of their life is open for scrutiny. They are either "in" or "out." They are either "hot" or "not."

Young women and girls are particularly vulnerable to societal expectations and judgment, and public shaming based on their appearance. Their mood and daily functioning can hang in the balance. With the advent of cyberbullying, new words and phrases have entered our lexicon: blocking, unfriending, IRL, screen shot, trolls, memes, up vote, haters, dick pic and alphas, to name just a few.

Revenge Porn Is Prosecuted As a Crime

One in eight Internet users in the U.S. has been a victim of non-consensual pornography, aka "revenge porn," which

is the distribution of sexually graphic images of someone without his or her consent, according to a study from the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative.

Until now, laws against online harassment, including revenge porn, were weak and mostly ineffective. For some victims, copyright law was the only way to get their naked pictures off the Internet if a jilted or angry paramour disseminated them without consent.

At present, there is no federal revenge-porn statute. In 2014, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed a bill pertaining to unlawful surveillance, making it illegal to spread pictures or videos of someone engaged in sexual acts that were taken without consent. But, there is no statewide revenge porn law in New York State. If an individual adult sends nude pictures to a paramour outside New York City, they are not fully protected under the law.

Recently, the New York City council voted to make it a misdemeanor crime to disclose, or to threaten to disclose, the intimate images of someone without their consent and with the intent to cause harm. The act will be punishable with up to one year in prison, a \$1,000 fine or both. According to NYC Councilman Rory Lancman, who initiated the legislation, under the current revenge porn laws, victims can request permission to seek an injunction, and the opportunity to seek compensatory and punitive damages, as well as attorneys' fees.

"New Yorkers deserve a non-consensual porn criminal law... and that protection should be regardless of the motives of the offender," said New York-based attorney Carrie Goldberg, who specializes in sexual-harassment crimes. "Even if the language leaves much to be desired and gives defense attorneys a lot of ways for their clients to escape liability, the bill does have excellent civil measures borrowed from our pending state bill that makes it so lawyers like me can sue if our clients are the victims of non-consensual porn."

Read Part 2 in next week's edition.

Jacqueline Harounian, Esq., a partner at Wisselman, Harounian & Associates, PC, in Great Neck, specializes in family law and divorce, victim's rights, sexual harassment and cyberbullying.



Tips for Staying Safe and Avoiding Bullies Online

1. Don't give out personal information outside your circle of trusted friends.
2. The same goes for pictures. Anything you text or post online can be screen shot and kept alive forever, even after you delete it.
3. Check your social media privacy settings on a regular basis, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter.
4. Be careful sharing information about your vacation and social plans.
5. If someone bothers you, sends you a picture, proposition or meme that makes you uncomfortable, take a screen shot and block and report that person to the appropriate entity. Social media companies are increasingly being held accountable for online safety, including bullying.
6. Don't engage or try to "one up" with a hater. He or she wants the attention and thrives on conflict. In most cases, the best course is to ignore.
7. Avoid negative talk online. Think before commenting. Be kind. Hate begets hate.
8. If you're getting unwanted attention or threats, file a formal report with the police or contact a lawyer. Harassment is illegal online and offline. Anonymous stalkers are common, and they can destroy your peace of mind. Do something.
9. Do not ever meet up with a stranger offline. Ever.
10. Don't text, FaceTime or share nude pictures. Ever. There is no safe way to protect yourself from the photos being shared. Many celebrities have learned the hard way that private images have a strange way of surfacing. Don't ever feel pressured to share intimate details.