

## Victim's Stalking and Harassment Risk Identification Checklist (VS-DASH 2009)<sup>1</sup>

The VS-DASH (2009) was developed by Drs Lorraine Sheridan, Karl Roberts and by Laura Richards, BSC, MSc, FRSA.

A number of high risk factors have been identified as being associated with serious violence and murder through researching many cases. We cannot predict what will happen in your case. However, we would like you to be aware of what those risk factors are and whether they are occurring in your case.

### REMEMBER

There is still limited knowledge, awareness and education about stalking, even though the problem is getting bigger. Many people and agencies, including law enforcement, still do not fully understand stalking and harassment behaviours and the risks.

They may not understand how frightening it is when it is happening to you. Many will expect to see physical violence and think it is not so serious until this happens. However, **a lot of the stalking behaviour is about coercive control and jealous surveillance i.e. psychological abuse/violence. This does not make it any less dangerous.**

Do not despair if you have not been satisfied with the initial police response. Keep trying to be heard. Complete the Stalking and Harassment Risk Identification Checklist (S-DASH 2009) and then take it into the Police if you answer positively to the questions. We can assure you that most police officers want to help, but they sometimes lack the tools and training needed.

### CONTACT

Please contact 'Protection Against Stalking' or go to the website if you want further advice or want to talk through what is happening to you.

#### Contact address

E-mail: [info@protectionagainststalking.org](mailto:info@protectionagainststalking.org)

Web: [www.protectionagainststalking.org](http://www.protectionagainststalking.org)

## Stalking and Harassment Risk Identification Checklist (VS-DASH 2009)

If you believe you are at risk or if you want to understand what risk there might be to you answer the questions below. This can be used if you know your stalker, as well as if you do not.

TICK THE RELEVANT BOX AND ADD COMMENT WHERE NECESSARY TO EXPAND <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
THE CONTEXT AND DETAIL OF WHAT IS HAPPENING IS VERY IMPORTANT. THESE ARE ALL RISK FACTORS OF SERIOUS HARM.	Yes	No
1. Are you very frightened?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Has (insert name of stalker(s).....) engaged in harassment on previous occasions(s)? (that you know of involving you or anyone else)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Has (insert name of stalker(s).....) ever destroyed or vandalised any of your property?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Does (name of stalker(s).....) visit you at work, home, etc., more than three times per week?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Does (.....) loiter around your home, workplace etc?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Has (.....) made any threats of physical or sexual violence in the current harassment incident?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Has (.....) harassed any third party since the harassment began? (e.g. your friends, family, children, colleagues, partners or neighbours)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>8. Has (.....) acted out violently towards other people within the current stalking incident?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>9. Has (.....) persuaded other people to help him/her?</b> (wittingly or unwittingly)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>10. Is (.....) known to be abusing drugs and/or alcohol?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>11. Is (.....) known to have been violent in the past?</b> (This could be physical or psychological)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other relevant information includes: how scared you are, details of threats and violence, duration of harassment, various harassing behaviours engaged in by suspect, your beliefs concerning the suspect's motives, weapons owned by suspect, nature of unwanted 'gifts'/items left or sent to you, attitude/demeanour of suspect including mental health issues and whether you have responded in any way to the suspect.		

### What do I do now?

If you have answered positively to any of these questions you should go to the Police. Even if physical violence has not occurred, this does not make it any less serious in terms of the potential risk posed.

You can contact 'Protection Against Stalking' in the first instance if you want to talk through what is happening to you or for advice about your situation. E-mail: [info@protectionagainststalking.org](mailto:info@protectionagainststalking.org)

Alternatively, you can call Victim Support for advice on 0845 30 30 30 and use the links page for contact details of other organisations you may find useful : [www.protectionagainststalking.org](http://www.protectionagainststalking.org)

## **Risk Factor Definitions – What the Research Tells Us**

### **Q1. Are you very frightened?**

Research demonstrates that the victim is frequently the best assessor of risk posed to them (Weisz et al. 2000). Stalking often consists of behaviours that, when taken at face value, may appear to be quite ordinary (e.g. walking past the victim's house, asking the victim to go out on dates). With repetition however, these behaviours can become menacing, and the victim can feel unsafe and threatened. In all cases (even those where no direct threat has been made or where the victim does not yet have a great deal of evidence) it is important that the extent of the victim's fear is recorded. Research indicates that victims are often reluctant to be labelled as 'stalking victims', despite being very frightened, feeling that no one will take their fears seriously (Sheridan et al., 2002).

### **Q2. Has the stalker(s) engaged in harassment on previous occasions(s)? (you and/or anyone else)**

One of the best predictors of future behaviour is past behaviour, and stalkers are no exception to this general rule. Those who stalk strangers and public figures are particularly prone to serial stalking (Dietz et al., 1991a,b; Sheridan, 2001). Even though the victim may not know the stalker very well, s/he may be aware of a local reputation the stalker has for this type of behaviour. Stalkers may also seem to stop stalking their victim (usually for reasons unclear to anyone but the stalker), only to suddenly resume the harassment at a later date.

### **Q3. Has the stalker(s) ever destroyed or vandalised your property?**

Various studies have identified that a sizeable proportion of stalkers (up to two thirds) will damage their victim's property (Blaauw et al., 2002) and this includes stalking engaged in by adolescents (McCann, 2000). Property damage may be associated with rage or frustration, revenge, a desire to harm something the victim cares about (i.e. destroying wedding photographs), a wish to undermine her belief in a safe environment (i.e. by cutting brake cables), as a form of threat, or it may be connected with breaking and entering the victim's property or spying on the victim. Property damage has been identified by researchers as preceding or co-occurring with physical attacks on the victim (Harmon et al., 1995, 1998).

### **Q4. Does the stalker(s) visit you at work, home, etc., more than three times per week?**

Stalking rarely takes place entirely at a distance. Research tells us that nearly all stalking cases will ultimately involve face-to-face contact between victim and stalker (Mullen et al., 2000). Some stalkers may appear or approach their victims regularly (i.e. on the victim's daily route to work). Others, particularly stalkers with an obvious mental illness, will appear in diverse places at unpredictable times (Sheridan and Boon, 2002). The research informs us that those stalkers who visit the victim's home, workplace, or other places frequented by the victim more than three times in a week are those

who are most likely to attack. It should be borne in mind, however, that some stalkers will have no regular pattern of harassment and in such cases an average of stalker visits could be estimated.

**Q5. Has the stalker(s) loitered around the your home, workplace etc?**

Most stalkers will be seen by their victims. The positive aspect of this is that evidence can be collected, particularly if the victim keeps a log of stalker sightings and behaviour. Stalkers who loiter around places frequented by the victim tend to be those who are most likely to attack their victim. Such stalkers may be compiling victim-related information or tracking the victim's habits. Whether secretive or overt, whether mentally disordered or not, most stalkers will share a belief that their behaviour is an appropriate response to circumstances.

**Q6. Has the stalker(s) made any threats of physical or sexual violence in the current harassment incidents?**

Stalkers frequently threaten their victims, either directly or indirectly. Examples of indirect threats include sending wreaths or violent images to the victim (often anonymously). Stalkers will often make specific written or verbal threats, however, and research demonstrates that these should be taken particularly seriously. Stalkers have been known to threaten violence months or even years into the future, and have indeed followed through on their threats.

**Q7. Has the stalker(s) harassed any third party since the harassment began? (i.e. friends, family, children, colleagues, partners or neighbours of the victim)**

In the majority of stalking cases, secondary victims will be identified. Although stalkers may stalk more than one person at a time, this question relates to associates of a primary victim. Stalkers will involve third parties for several reasons, principally to upset the victim (i.e. by harassing the victim's children), to obtain information on the victim (i.e. by hounding the victim's friends), to remove perceived obstacles between the stalker and victim (i.e. by harassing the victim's partner), and to punish those perceived as helping or shielding the victim (i.e. work colleagues who state that the victim is not available). Individual stalkers have been known to harass hundreds of third parties who they perceive as connected with the primary victim (Mohandie et al., 2006; Mullen et al., 1999).

**Q8. Has the stalker(s) acted out violently towards other people within the current stalking incidents?**

As noted immediately above, secondary victims will be identified in a majority of stalking cases, and these can be a valuable source of evidential information. Research suggests that third parties will be physically attacked by the stalker in between 6% and 17% of cases (Mohandie et al., 2006; Mullen, Pathé, Purcell, and Stuart 1999; Sheridan & Davies, 2001). Stalkers who attack those associated with the victim are more likely to also attack the primary victim. Persons perceived as preventing access to the victim or protecting the victim are at particular risk.

**Q9. Has the stalker(s) persuaded other people to help him/her? (Wittingly or unwittingly)**

The abilities of a stalker to pose as other persons and/or to draw information out of third parties should never be under-estimated. Many stalkers will devote hours each day to their stalking campaign, and are capable of stalking their victims for many years (Meloy, 1996). New technologies can facilitate harassment, enabling stalkers to impersonate another on-line; to send or post hostile material, misinformation and false messages (i.e. to Usenet groups); and to trick other internet users into harassing or threatening a victim (i.e. by posting the victim's personal details on a bulletin board along with a controversial invitation or message) (Sheridan and Grant, 2007).

**Q10. Is the stalker(s) known to be abusing drugs and/or alcohol?**

Substance abuse by the stalker has been found to be associated with physical assault on the victim in a significant number of cases (Rosenfeld's 2004 review of 13 relevant studies). The abuse of various substances by stalkers can contribute both to the basis from which the stalking occurs and to individual violent episodes. Binge drinking or drug taking may directly precede an attack, fuelling obsessive, yearning or angry thought patterns, or by lending the stalker the confidence to approach or attack the victim. It is well known that substance abuse compounds the violence risk among those who are already mentally ill (Steadman et al., 1998), although non-mentally ill stalkers may also abuse alcohol and drugs.

**Q11. Is the stalker(s) known to have been violent in the past? (Physical or psychological)**

One of the best predictors of future behaviour is past behaviour. It may not always be physical violence but could include the psychological impact as well. This might be in terms of coercive control and/or jealous surveillance of the victim (Regan, Kelly, Morris and Dibb 2007) if the suspect(s) feels a real sense of entitlement or ownership of the victim. Generally speaking, stalkers who have been violent before – whether as part of a stalking campaign or in relation to separate offences – are more likely to be violent again. It should be noted, however, that some of the most seriously violent stalkers identified in the past had no recorded criminal history (James and Farnham, 2003).