

Embargoed until 00.01 on Monday 21 November 2011

BEWARE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Police are warning people to be cautious about the information they add to social networking sites to reduce the risk of being cyber-stalked.

Stalking is a key factor in many domestic abuse cases and is predominantly committed by a former partner after a relationship has ended.

One in five women and one in 10 men report being stalked at some point in their lives (British Crime Survey 2009/10). Cyber-stalking has increased with the growth of internet use and the popularity of social networking sites.

Elizabeth, a victim from Devon, experienced cyber-stalking from a previously abusive partner who found information about her whereabouts many years later and stalked her online.

“It was very easy for my stalker to track my movements and harass me through Facebook and similar social media sites. He would go to terrifying lengths to find out her whereabouts,” she said. “He was able to add information about her that was untrue to my social networks. These sites operate with minimal security so it is crucial to find the appropriate privacy settings to keep safe online.”

Cyber-stalking can involve harassment through the internet, email, social networking sites or text messages.

Steven Slater, Computer Forensic Manager for Devon and Cornwall Police, said: “It is important to remind people to be cautious with the information they choose to add online and to check their privacy settings to ensure that only the people they want to see the information can.”

“People should not post anything they would not be happy for other people to see; even if information was originally private it could become public at a later stage.”

Alexis Bowater, Chief Executive of Stalking UK, said: “Social networking sites are a great way to keep in touch with friends and family but the information added, however inconsequential, can be used by an ex-partner for cyber-stalking.”

“Cyber-stalking and stalking are misunderstood crimes and we know people still don’t recognise stalking behaviour when it’s happening to them. Even though they may feel uncomfortable with someone’s obsessive behaviour all too often people put up with it.”

Police advise the following useful tips to help stay safe online:

1. Before signing up to a website or a social network read the privacy policy plus terms and conditions so that you are aware of how they will use your information.

2. Review your privacy settings on social network(s) and make sure they are set to the level most appropriate to protect your privacy.
3. Be very careful about the information you post on line and never reveal personal information, e.g. home address, date of birth and phone number.
4. Choose a strong password for your account to prevent someone else from accessing it. Do not share passwords.
5. Log out of your account when you have finished using the site. Do not allow people to access your profile.
6. Don't post what you don't want others to know.
7. Never click on links or install applications that are sent to you via unexpected messages.
8. Get your friends and family to have a look at your profiles to check that you aren't giving out too much personal information or posting inappropriate photos/films - they might see something you've missed.
9. Respect yourself and others on line.
10. If you are unlucky enough to have a bad online experience, report it to the service provider or to the police.

For help and support call the National Stalking Helpline on 0808 802 0300 or visit Devon and Cornwall Police on www.devon-cornwall.police.uk

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Notes to editors:

The media are invited to attend a briefing event for Domestic Abuse Awareness Week (Monday 21 – Friday 25 November 2011) at Middlemoor, Devon and Cornwall Police headquarters on Wednesday 16 November at 10am.

Interviews will be available with:

- Detective Chief Inspector. Steve Parker, Devon and Cornwall Police
- Detective Inspector Andy Berry and Chairman of Northern Devon MARAC, Devon and Cornwall Police
- Steven Slater, Computer Forensic Manager, Devon and Cornwall Police
- Rachel Martin, ADVA Manager
- Carolyn Southwell, Pet Retreat Manager, RSPCA

DVD and audio copies of interviews with victims will be available for TV and radio broadcast.

For further information please contact:

- Sarah Shervington, External Communications Support Officer, Devon and Cornwall Police
Tel: 01392 452596

Email: sarah.shervington@devonandcornwall.pnn.police.uk

- Annette Richman, KOR Communications
Tel: 01392 466733