

Local

Technology Used As Weapon In Domestic Abuse Cases

By Kathryn Hauser, WBZ-TV

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BOSTON (CBS) – It is a sinister twist in cases of domestic abuse.

Stalkers are distorting the intent of technology to follow their victims 24/7, often without the victim having any idea it's happening.

There can be threatening text messages around the clock.

Bogus social media pages and endless phone calls as well.

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(Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

Britny, who didn't want to share her last name, lived a life of digital hell with her ex-boyfriend.

"When I was going through this, I felt completely alone. I didn't tell anyone about what was happening," she said.

Risa Mednick, the director of Transition House in Cambridge, said this problem is growing exponentially.

"The abusive partner's psyche is all about power and control," she explained. "Enter the digital age and it becomes a little bit easier to exert that control 24-7 with just a little bit of tech know how."

Abusers often employ software programs meant for legitimate uses, like keeping tabs on children or employees. Mednick said these surveillance tools are available on the Internet, often for as little as \$25.

Andrew Lewman of the TOR Project, a group dedicated to protecting anonymity on the web, is now helping shelters unravel a complex technological maze.

"Criminals are opportunists. They will use any technology available at any time, you know whether it is steak knives, cars, email, text messaging."

Social media is another weapon, with the creation of fake accounts.

Katie Ray-Jones of the National Domestic Violence Hotline said, "Where partners create fake identities on Facebook to see if they can get their partner to engage with someone else, and then accusing them of cheating and flirting."

It's a faceless menace that leaves many victims confused.

"You become paranoid, and frankly the victims when they come into the shelter at that point, pure cyberstalking victims sound like they are schizophrenic," said Lewman.

Britny added, "I wasn't exactly sure of what was happening."

Experts say if a victim suspects they are being stalked digitally, they should reach out to a shelter or law enforcement.

Mednick said to consider getting a new phone, but not to disconnect the old one right away.

That could heighten an abuser's anger.

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