

Penn State experts say bullying, domestic violence fueled by online posts

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Last month, a woman living in North Carolina was shot and killed by her ex-boyfriend after she changed her Facebook status to "engaged." As social networking sites and cell phones make it easier to connect with people, it's also making it easier to bully and stalk people.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice's [National Crime Victimization Survey](#) released in 2009, 3.4 million people ages 18 or older were victims of stalking during a 12-month period. One in four of these victims reported some form of cyberstalking such as e-mail (83 percent) or instant messaging (35 percent). The survey, conducted during the first half of 2006, was based on interviews about stalking behaviors that occurred largely in 2005. (Facebook was opened for public use in September 2006 and Twitter, released in July 2006, did not begin gaining popularity until March 2007, during the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Tex.)

John Chapin, associate professor of communications at Penn State Beaver, promotes violence prevention education, with help from the staff of Crisis Center North, a counseling and outreach center in Pittsburgh that provides free services for domestic abuse victims. Chapin, whose work includes going into middle schools, high schools and colleges to talk to classes about bullying, dating and relationship violence, said the students he speaks to know more about violence than he imagined.

Despite their knowledge, most kids, he said, have an optimistic view on

violence, in which they think bad things happen only to others. They know about domestic violence, date rape and bullying but don't think it could happen to them.

"They compare themselves to someone they know is being abused and tell themselves it happens to people like that, not me," Chapin said.

"Even women in domestic violence shelters perceive other women as being worse off, fitting the profile of [domestic violence](#) better. It's all about the perception. When you change the perception, you change the behavior."

When it comes to stalking and cyberstalking, Chapin said students are also misinformed. Most high school and college students consider it only abuse when the female was stalking the male, but not vice versa.

"They said that's what guys do," Chapin said. "It's the double standard in reverse."

When it comes to stalking online, many students did not consider looking at profiles, status updates and pictures as stalking behavior. One student said to Chapin, "That's what you're supposed to do online; it's not stalking. If you don't want people reading about you online, don't post on Facebook."

Susan DelPonte, a Student Affairs specialist at Penn State's Center for Women Students [studentaffairs.psu.edu/womenscenter/], said cyberstalking, specifically through Facebook, has risen incredibly during the past few years. She warns students to protect their privacy online to avoid becoming victims of crime. In the past students reported being verbally abused online. Inappropriate photos of students are also often posted against their will. These crimes happen to people of the opposite and same sex. Everyone, she said, is a potential victim.

DePonte reminds students that one in four women have been a victim of rape or attempted rape. On a college campus with an enrollment of 40,000 students, that statistic translates to 10,000 students who may have been victimized. DePonte added that only 1,000 of those students will actually tell someone -- at the Center for Women Students, University Health Services, the police or a friend. Only 100 of them, or 10 percent of victims, will ask for assistance. She hopes [students](#) are aware that there are numerous resources on campus for victims of violence, regardless of when the crime occurred.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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