

New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2009 Domestic Violence Handbook

Technology and Safety

Technology is always changing, which can both aid victims regarding safety AND provide new ways for abusers to stalk and harass their victims. This information can help you protect your privacy, for example by preventing the abuser from knowing who you call, who calls you, or the content of your private conversations. In addition, knowing how to use these same technologies can help you plan for your safety.

Telephone Privacy & Safety

Traditional corded phones are still the most secure way of communicating. If you have access to a corded phone connected to a traditional land line, this may be the most confidential way to contact domestic violence programs and other people and services regarding your safety.

If you have your phone bundled with your cable and Internet service, contact your service provider to talk to them about 911 service and your phone. 911 service and Internet phones do not operate the same way as traditional land lines. These types of phone services are not as secure as traditional corded/landline phones, even though they might appear the same.

Many phones now come equipped with Caller ID. Caller ID can be both a useful asset and a privacy problem. With Caller ID, you should think about steps you can take to prevent your abuser from knowing who you call or who calls you.

If you live with your abuser and your telephone has a Caller ID box, your abuser can track who has called you. If you live separately from your abuser, you can use Caller ID to make sure the caller is someone you want to speak to, before answering the telephone. If you have Caller ID, you can also get Anonymous Call Rejection Service. This service prevents an incoming call from ringing at your home if callers have blocked their number from display on your Caller ID box. Callers will reach a recorded message saying that the call will not be accepted unless the block is removed.

Be careful about giving personal information over the phone. If someone calls asking for your information, and identifies themselves as being from an organization you would be familiar with, such as your insurance company, ask if you can call them back. This way,

you can verify if the person calling is actually from the organization, and not pretending to be a legitimate representative.

Call Services

Call Return Service (*69) allows you to call back the last number that called you, whether or not you answered the call. In some areas, in addition to placing the call, a recording will give you the number you are calling back. If you do not want your abuser to know about the last call you made, you can press *89 after you've completed the call. This will prevent the abuser from accessing that number.

The re-dial button on your telephone also allows your abuser to call the last number you dialed, although without knowing the number. Since most domestic violence programs answer their telephone by saying the name of their program, your abuser could learn that you are reaching out for help. To avoid this, you can call another number, such as a dry cleaner, after making a call you do not want your abuser to know about.

Call Trace Service traces the number of an annoying, obscene, or harassing call by dialing *57. If your trace is successful, your telephone company will provide the number to the police. To request an investigation, you must file a complaint with the police and call your telephone company.

There is a fee for purchasing the Caller ID service and a fee for using the Call Return and Call Trace. More complete information about these and other services is available in the front of your telephone book or by calling your local telephone company.

Answering Machines

An answering machine is another good way to make sure the caller is someone you want to speak to, before answering the telephone. If you have an answering machine with a tape, and the abuser leaves a threatening message on the answering machine, be sure to remove the tape and save it. If you use a digital answering machine, do not unplug the machine. Unplugging the machine may erase the message. Call the police and ask them to come over and record the message.

Cell Phones

If you use a cell phone, be aware there are numerous ways an abuser can use cell phone technology to overhear your calls or locate you. Use a cell phone **only** if you do not have access to a regular phone, and try not to give any identifying details on a cell phone. If your abuser works for a phone company or law enforcement agency, use extreme caution, and discuss cell phone safety with a domestic violence advocate.

If you receive threatening text messages or voice messages on your cell phone, take the phone to the police station and ask them to record the message off of your voice mail and to take digital pictures of the text messages on your phone.

A cellular phone in "silent mode" or "auto answer" can serve as a tracking device. Additionally, all cellular phones have GPS or "Global Positioning System," which is a location-finding feature. If your abuser gives you a cell phone, be wary of it. It may have the GPS enabled. You can check with your cell phone company to find out if this feature has been enabled. If you find out that the GPS has been enabled, consider how your abuser might react if you had it disabled. If you decide to flee from your abuser, you might want to turn off your cell phone or not take it with you when you leave.

Wireless or "hands-free" headsets are also easily monitored. If you have a wireless headset, regardless of the type or model, do not give out personal information while using it. Instead, wait to use a traditional land line with a corded phone.