



Conversation Guide: Harassing and Threatening Messages



What are harassing and threatening messages?

Harassing and threatening messages are messages that upset, threaten, or scare the person receiving them, and that continue even after the sender has been told to stop. They can make a person feel unsafe or afraid. Harassing and threatening messages can be sent through any platform or device with a messaging feature, including text messages, emails, phone calls/voicemails, social media platforms, and others.

This could look like someone:

- Sending abusive, mean, scary, or pushy text messages or emails
- Leaving lots of hurtful or threatening messages on voicemail
- Sending nonstop messages on apps like Facebook, WhatsApp, or Snapchat.

Conversation Starters with Survivors

Before getting started, remind yourself of the foundational principles of survivor-centered tech safety support. See Foundational [The 4 Core Principles of Tech Safety Planning](#).



Step 1: Understand what's happening

Start by asking questions that will help you understand how the abuser is sending harassing and threatening messages. This helps determine the level of risk and harm and helps you identify the most effective steps to address the issue. For example, if someone is receiving harassing messages on social media but not via text, changing their phone number won't solve this specific problem.

Ask:

- Does someone make fun of you, embarrass you, or threaten you through text, email, social media, or voicemail?
- If yes, explore which specific accounts or devices the survivor receives these messages on.
- Do their messages make you feel scared or unsafe?
- How many times a day do you get mean or scary messages?
- Does your current or ex-partner force you to reply to their messages by threatening you or getting angry if you don't answer?



Step 2: Understand what the survivor wants to do

Each survivor's needs and goals will be different. Instead of assuming what should happen next, ask:

- What would you like to see happen? What do you want?
- Do you have an order or peace bond that the abusive messages are breaching?
- Do you want the messages to stop?
- Do you want law enforcement involved?
- Do you want to keep a record of what has happened?



Step 3: Identify Strategies that match the survivor's goals

Once the survivor's goals are clear, help them develop a plan to secure their finances and reduce further harm. Here, we are focused on technological strategies and responses. You should also take whatever other steps you would normally recommend if, for example, an abuser is breaching a peace bond or court order or if you have immediate or urgent concerns about the survivor's safety.

Suggested strategies to stop harassing messages:

- Blocking the abusive person on whichever platforms they are using to send the messages so that they are no longer able to send them. Only do this if it's safe to do so (i.e., if blocking them will not escalate the risk of harm or violence).
 - To block someone on your phone, go to their contact or their number in your call history and press "Block Caller."
 - To block someone on social media, go to your account settings and follow the instructions or learn more through the "Secure Your Tech" menu at www.techsafety.ca
- If the messages are coming via text or phone call/voicemail, consider encouraging the survivor to change their phone number.

- Some telecom companies charge a fee (around \$50) to change a phone number. Encourage the survivor to ask if the company will waive the fee in situations of harassment or violence.
- To prevent sharing the new number with their abuser, survivors can make their number private by turning off the “Show My Caller ID” phone feature in their phone settings.

Suggested strategies to if in contact with their abuser but wants to reduce their exposure to the harassment and threats:

- Setting a unique ringtone for the abusive partner, allowing them to recognize their calls and choose whether to answer.
- Disabling read receipts in privacy settings.
- Not answering the abusive person’s calls; [save the voicemails as evidence](#).
- If possible, getting a second phone that can be used in the survivor’s day-to-day life and with other contacts for safe communication. It would also be important to keep their main phone for evidence, and so the abuser doesn’t realize they have a second one.

Suggested strategies to remove or takedown messages:

- Report abuse to platforms like [Facebook](#), [Snapchat](#), or other apps. Most companies don’t allow harassment within their policies and can take action after receiving a report of abuse.

Legal Action and Reporting

Survivors might not be sure if they want to go to the police or may not want to involve law enforcement right now. However, harassing or threatening messages can disappear quickly as some platforms automatically delete messages once they have been read or after a company has received a report of abuse. If the evidence isn’t preserved when the abuse happens, they

may not be able to access it later if they change their mind about involving law enforcement. Encourage them to preserve and document any abusive messages in case they need the evidence in the future.

Suggested strategies for legal action and reporting:

- [Keep a record](#) of all harassing and threatening messages. Write down the time, date, who did it, and any other important details. See WSC's Sample [Technology-Facilitated Violence Log](#)
- Take [screenshots](#) or [video screen record](#) the abusive messages when they happen.
- Check if the app notifies the other person when you take a screenshot (like Snapchat). If it does, it might be safer to use another device to take a photo or video instead.
- Include any identifying information like the person's profile, including phone number and any details that show who they are, in the documentation of the evidence.
- Make sure the date of the abusive message is visible in the documentation of the evidence.
- If the abuse is through email, save the original email because it has extra information, like the sender's location.
- Store the evidence in a safe place (a device or account that the abuser does not have access to). Back it up somewhere else, too, just in case.

Harassing and threatening messages can have a serious impact on a survivor's safety, well-being, and sense of control. By understanding their experiences, exploring their goals, and identifying safety strategies, anti-violence workers can help survivors navigate technology-facilitated abuse in ways that prioritize their safety and choices. Whether the survivor wants to block the abuser, document the harassment, or take action to remove harmful content, providing survivor-centered support ensures they have the tools and information needed to make the best decisions for their situation.

Suggested Resources

- [Dealing with Harassing Calls, Texts and Messages](#)
- [Preventing Harassment and Threats through E-Transfers](#)
- [What is Tech-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence?](#)
- [Is Tech Abuse Happening to You \(Poster\)](#)
- [Tech Safety Planning Conversation Starters](#)
- [Tech Safety Planning Conversation Starters for Anti-Violence Workers Supporting Indigenous Survivors](#)
- [Your Safety, Your Voice: Dealing with Harassing and Threatening Messages](#) – Video for Survivors
- [Safety Planning Check List](#)
- [Preserving Digital Evidence Toolkit](#)

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is part of a larger pattern of violence that can happen both online and in person. As a support worker, it's important to let survivors know they are not alone. For guidance on addressing TFGBV, you can refer to our comprehensive techsafety.ca website.

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