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HIGH-TECH ABUSE WORSE THAN EVER

by Bob Sullivan, The Red Tape Chronicles

Leah lived for seven years with an abusive man. The bruises, the bleeding and the isolation were only part of his strategy to control her, she says.

He turned technology on her, too. He installed spyware on her computer, read her e-mail, tracked her cell phone calls, spied on the Web sites she visited, even attached a GPS locator device to her car.

One day, after she visited her college Web site, he accused her of trying to contact a former boyfriend. The punishment was severe.

“He beat me all weekend after that,” she said.

There’s nothing new about abusive spouses using technology to terrorize, said Cindy Southworth, technology director at the National Network to End Domestic Violence. What is new is that now nearly all abusers use high-tech spying tools to try to extend their domination, she said.

That’s why the domestic violence victim advocacy group is running a training session on high-tech spousal abuse tactics this week in Kansas City for employees and volunteers at the nation’s 2,000 local domestic abuse shelters.

“Victims find us every week,” she said. “We are constantly hearing stories now from local agencies we’ve trained on this. Everybody is using technology now, so in every domestic violence case, the parties are using technology.”

Spyware has been around for years, and so have software packages marketed specifically to suspicious spouses.

But so have wiretapping laws which make electronic interception of other people’s conversations illegal -- making use of such spouse spying tools a likely violation of federal law. That should make you scratch your head when you search for “cheating spouse” on your favorite search engine and find thousands of links to software products specifically intended to spy on husbands or wives.

In at least one high-profile case, a software maker was indicted by federal authorities for marketing spouse-spying products. In August 2005, Carlos Enrique Perez-Melara was indicated in the Southern District of California for creating and selling a product called "Loverspy."

<<http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/cybercrime/perezIndict.htm>> Four Loverspy users also were indicted.

But the legal action hasn't slowed the use of spy technology in abusive relationships, Southworth said. If anything, the tools are more common now and much easier to use.

GPS Makes it Easy to Track Victims

The latest twist: GPS gadgets that sell for hundreds of dollars that can be secretly installed on a victim's vehicle. The unit beams coordinates to a Web page that maps the victim's car wherever it goes.

Leah's former husband placed a GPS unit underneath the hood of her car, she said.

"He would show up everywhere I was -- the grocery store, at work," she said.

Leah was scheduled to tell her story at the week-long "Safety Net" technology awareness training, which is designed to teach shelter workers and volunteers about the latest high-tech weapons that are commonly used in abusive relationships. Leah, a 35-year-old from Minnesota, agreed to talk with MSNBC.com under condition that we preserve her anonymity.

Leah says she was naive about technology when she met her future husband in 1994. Looking back, she said, the signs of paranoia and his need for control seem obvious, though they weren't at the time.

In 1998, he gave her a cell phone and demanded that she answer it within two rings. At night, he would search the call history to see who she'd been talking to.

"I didn't realize he could do that at the time," she said.

Things escalated quickly. One evening, she woke up to find him e-mailing her friends, pretending to be her. He was fishing for information about where she'd been.

She began taking extra precautions, such as deleting her Internet browser cache, but that was ineffective. Spyware he'd installed on the machine allowed him to watch her every move online.

Cut Off from the Outside World

Southworth said spying is just one goal when an abuser uses high-tech tools. The other is isolation. In a traditional abusive situation, a spouse or lover will slowly cut off the

victim from the outside world, discouraging interaction with friends and family. In extreme cases, the couple will actually move far away from family and friends, making e-mail and Web access the only remaining tie to other relationships and normalcy.

“The reason they do this is to maintain power and control,” Southworth said.

The tactics are effective, as Leah learned quickly when she could no longer e-mail friends.

Several research projects have shown that the most dangerous time for an abused spouse comes when the victim considers leaving or ending the relationship. There is real danger that the violence will escalate then, Southworth said. Technology can genuinely endanger victims at this point.

“With spyware, if the victim is thinking about leaving, all that is captured. If the victim looks for plane tickets, shelters, a new apartment, it all shows up in the computer logs,” she said. Given the prevalence of spying software, the agency now advises anyone in an abusive relationship not to use their home computer for these kinds of tasks. Instead, they should go to a public library or a friend’s house and use their computer for research, Southworth said.

Spyware Difficult to Spot

Hiep Dang, a security researcher from McAfee who will offer a presentation on technical aspects of spyware at the domestic violence conference, said some people mistakenly believe they can find spyware when it’s installed on their computers.

“The programs can run in stealth mode undetected,” he said. “They make it very difficult to find these applications on a machine.”

McAfee’s antivirus product will detect and disable most spouse-spyware programs, as will several other antivirus products, but anyone with physical access to the computer can disable and bypass the security software fairly easily.

Separation makes it easier for victims to keep their computers clean of spyware, but it’s no guarantee that technology can’t be used against them. Long after Leah had left her husband, he was still trying to track her.

Two years ago, knowing that Leah had grown cautious about using her computer, he sent an electronic greeting card laced with spyware software to Leah’s mother. She didn’t fall for the trick, but the incident served as a reminder that Leah must still be wary of the kinds of things her former lover might do.

‘Always going to be a battle’

Leah has 5-year-old and 7-year-old daughters, and must constantly remind schools and social groups not to put the girls’ pictures or names on Web pages her ex-husband could easily find.

“There’s always going to be a battle around technology and safety for us,” she said.

Southworth is quick to point out that technology tools are not the cause of abuse, and said she doesn’t believe they contribute to an escalation in violence.

“Twenty years ago, abusers checked auto odometers to keep track of spouses. We’ve had phone tapping for decades,” she said.

Leah’s not so sure.

“There were more tactics used to stalk me because of technology. I was directly punished because of these things. I was bleeding and black and blue because of a technology (device) he had used,” she said. “I love using e-mail, I love my cell phone. There are all these great things about technology, but for someone in my position there’s so many downfalls to it all that people are just are not aware of.

“If there was no that technology, my past and present would have been easier and my future (would) be easier,” she said.

TIPS

- Anyone in a bad relationship should not use their home computer -- or any computer that an abuser has physical access to -- for research. Use a computer in a public location to find information on shelters or to communicate with friends.
- Updated antivirus software will generally detect the presence of spyware, but only if it is configured properly. Victims who leave an abusive situation and get a new computer should keep software updated and be very wary of unexpected e-mails or electronic greeting cards.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence has much more information available <<http://www.nnedv.org/index.php>> on its Web site.

<http://redtape.msnbc.com/2007/08/leah-lived-for-.html>