

'You': A criminologist explains Joe Goldberg's 'erotomaniac delusions' in Netflix stalking drama

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Penn Badgley as Joe Goldberg. Credit: Netflix

Despite its unusual choice of protagonist—obsessive stalker and serial killer Joe Goldberg (Penn Badgley)—Netflix's "You" is entering its fourth season, with audiences around the world streaming the many crimes he commits in the name of "love."

Goldberg's narration (spoken directly to "you," the changing subjects of

his obsessions) draws viewers in with his backstory and attempt to use logic to explain his behavior.

His ability to manipulate situations to get the attention of his romantic crushes suggests that with strong belief and dedication to the pursuit of "the one," we all can make others fall in love with us. As an academic who researches stalking, I think this message is dangerous.

Persistent unwanted contact from a potential or past suitor is not romantic. It is scary, it is uncomfortable, it is [stalking](#).

Though "You" is fictional (based on [the novels of Caroline Kepnes](#)), it depicts realistic characters and stalking behavior. For example, Goldberg uses "neutralization" (the internal justification used by a person to defend actions deemed wrong by society) to rationalize his violent decisions.

[A study in 1957](#) found that delinquent youths justified their behavior through techniques of neutralization, while stressing they were fully aware that their activities were illegitimate. Research into [cyberstalking and harassment](#) mirrors these findings.

Goldberg's appeal is that he is aware of his actions but explains his logic in a way that is understandable to an emotional audience, who can relate to feelings of infatuation. This is concerning if some viewers start to mimic these sentiments and act on their emotions as the character they're watching does.

Goldberg is an exaggerated version of the romantic hero, who wants to court the heroine and live happily ever after. His obsession with locking down "the one" reinforces a fantasy myth that has been told for decades. Considering the [extensive popularity of the series](#), I'm concerned by the glamourisation of stalking and disregard of the criminal nature of

Goldberg's coercive tactics.

What kind of stalker is Joe Goldberg?

Developed by experts in the field, [The Stalking Risk Profile](#) gives professionals structured guidelines to assist them in making informed decisions about the risk and treatment of stalking perpetrators.

The set of categories considers the context and motivations for stalking behavior, as well as its function. Goldberg exhibits traits of an "intimacy seeker" according to the [stalking categories](#), but as "You" progresses, he fluctuates between the identities of a "rejected" and "resentful" stalker who feels wronged by others or wants to reconcile with his partner.

Goldberg details obsessions with Guinevere Beck (Elizabeth Lail, series one), Love Quinn (Victoria Pedretti, series two and three) and Marianne Bellamy (Tati Gabrielle, series three and four), believing each time that they are his romantic soulmate.

He researches his romantic interests extensively—mainly through social media—and creates a projection of their character. This [trend is common](#) among the young audience the series is catered towards.

The behavior of "intimacy seeking" stalkers is frequently [motivated by a serious mental health condition](#), that involves mistaken ideas about the victim, such as the belief that the two of them are already in a relationship when they aren't (known as [erotomaniac delusions](#)).

Creating an emotional bond and an intimate relationship is the motivation for intimacy-seeking stalkers, and Goldberg's character portrays this effectively.

How realistic is the stalking in "You?"

Goldberg's infatuations start from this "intimacy seeker" standpoint. But when he manages to secure a relationship with his interests, his paranoia leads him down a path of violence towards anyone who threatens the potential union.

This happens in the form of the stalking, kidnapping and murder of his partner's friends, former partners and eventually the romantic interest themselves. Goldberg's motives to stalk continually change, but he constantly relies on his expertise to monitor his victims' [social media](#) and track them down.

He convinces the audience that he simply cannot help himself, though he tries many times to stop his obsessive thought and stalking fixations. But this is where the realism of "You" fades away. The violent path that Joe goes down [is less common](#) among real life "intimacy seeking" stalkers.

But hopefully it brings the audience to the realization that his [thought process](#) is chauvinistic, abnormal and that his stalking behavior is used as a means to commit extreme violence and murder.

As each series of "You" comes to a close, it becomes apparent that this "average Joe" who spends most of his time obsessing over a romantic muse and manipulates every situation to attain "love," can never live happily ever after.

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