

Stalking

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ABSTRACT

Stalking is a term commonly used to refer to unwanted or obsessive attention by an individual or group toward another person. Stalking behaviors are related to harassment and intimidation and may include following the victim in person or monitoring them. According to a 2002 report by the National Center for Victims of Crime "Virtually any unwanted contact between two people [that intends] to directly or indirectly communicates a threat or places the victim in fear can be considered stalking" although in practice the legal standard is usually somewhat stricter.

The effects of stalkers on their victims are immense and can result in significant psychiatric morbidity. Only recently, however, has the behaviour become the subject of scientific study, and research remains in its infancy.

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► *Implication for health policy/practice/research/medical education:*
Stalking

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Stalking is a term commonly used to refer to unwanted or obsessive attention by an individual or group toward another person. Stalking behaviors are related to harassment and intimidation and may include following the victim in person or monitoring them. According to a 2002 report by the National Center for Victims of Crime "Virtually any unwanted contact between two people [that intends] to directly or indirectly

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communicates a threat or places the victim in fear can be considered stalking" although in practice the legal standard is usually somewhat stricter.

The Violence Against Women Act of 2005, defined stalking as "engaging in a course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to:

- (A) fear for his or her safety or the safety of others;
- (B) suffer substantial emotional distress."

According to Lamber Royackers a Psychiatrist:

- "Stalking is a form of mental assault, in which the perpetrator

repeatedly, unwantedly, and disruptively breaks into the life-world of the victim, with whom they have no relationship (or no longer have). Moreover, the separated acts that make up the intrusion cannot by themselves cause the mental abuse, but do taken together (cumulative effect) (1)."

It has been called the crime of the nineties. A crime that until recently was seldom reported or investigated. It is the crime of stalking, and it is no longer just the bane of celebrities and the wealthy. A recent media report indicated that as of the mid-1990's, there were more than 200,000 stalkers in America. The prey of the aforementioned stalkers, like victims of domestic violence, come from all racial and ethnic groups and all socioeconomic backgrounds. The ways, methods, and motivations of stalkers are as varied as the human mind can muster, and victims suffer a broad range of indignities from harassing phone calls to death.

Types of stalkers

• Rejected stalkers

Pursue their victims in order to reverse, correct, or avenge a rejection (e.g. divorce, separation, termination).

• Resentful stalkers

Pursue a vendetta because of a sense of grievance against the victims— motivated mainly by the desire to frighten and distress the victim.

• Intimacy seekers

Seek to establish an intimate, loving relationship with their victim. To many of them the victim is a long-sought-after soul mate, and they were 'meant' to be together.

• Incompetent suitors

Despite poor social or courting skills, have a fixation, or in some cases, a sense of entitlement to an intimate relationship with those who have attracted their amorous interest. Their victims are most often already in a dating relationship with someone else.

• Predatory stalkers

Spy on the victim in order to prepare and plan an attack—often sexual—on the victim (2).

The first investigations of female stalking were made in the context of studies of erotomania (3-6).

Epidemiological studies show that most stalkers are male and their victims are female (7-11). This is a constant in the scientific literature, even if stalking is not considered a gender-specific behavior (12).

Typically, the perpetrators were single heterosexual women of mean age 35 (range 18–58) years. Often, these women did not have children. They appeared to be educated, with a large majority having graduated from high school and a solid minority having achieved a college or graduate degree. Their intelligence may have allowed them to be more successful in pursuing their victims. Reports of substance abuse were not common, but about one-third of women used substances while stalking.

A great majority of the victims of female stalkers were known to them, either as acquaintances, former lovers, or family members. However, one-fifth of the victims were completely unknown to their stalkers. Frequent reasons for stalking included anger, obsession, feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and dependency. Usual stalking behaviors included telephone calls and messages, giving letters and gifts, driving by the victim's location, trespassing, and following the victim. More than half of the women threatened their victims, and a quarter were physically violent, with three victims losing their lives to their stalkers. However, most episodes of violence did not involve use of a weapon and did not result in injuries. Violence was more likely if the stalker and the victim had been previously sexually intimate. In more than half of the cases, the behavior increased in frequency and intensity.

The study of stalking is still in its infancy; however, several mental health experts have begun to classify stalkers into the following categories according to certain characteristics as well as typologies based upon the stalker's mental state. The most widely-referenced study was conducted by Vernon Gerberth who classified stalkers into two categories:

1. The Psychopathic Personality Stalker and
2. The Psychotic Personality Stalker.

• Psychopathic personality stalker

This stalker has lost control over the victim (most commonly a spouse or lover) and intends to seriously harm the victim. This type of stalker insists on male dominance and exhibits a macho image in order to hide feelings of inferiority.

• Psychotic Personality Stalker

This stalker becomes obsessed with an unobtainable stranger and mounts a campaign of harassment to make the victim aware of his or her existence. They sincerely believe that the victim harbors intense feelings of love for them and would act upon that love or positively respond to the stalker's advances if it was not for the interference of outside factors. Michael A. Zond has also researched stalkers, categorizing them by behavior characteristics (4). Zond and his team classify stalkers into the following three distinct categories:

• Erotomania

This type of stalker has a delusional disorder in which the predominant theme of the delusion is that a celebrity or public figure of either the opposite gender or of a higher status is in love with the stalker. The victim does not know the stalker. The stalker remains convinced the victim loves him or her and would return the affection if not for some external influence. The duration of stalking and delusion usually lasts 124 months.

• Love Obsessional

Like the erotomaniac, this stalker believes that if the victim would simply acknowledge the stalker's existence, the victim would fall in love with the stalker. These stalkers only know their victims through the media. They usually engage in a campaign to make their existence known to the victim by writing, telephoning, or otherwise attempting to contact the victim, which lasts approximately 146 months.

• Simple Obsessional

Unlike the two previous categories, there was a prior relationship between the stalker and the intended victim. This relationship may have been a former spouse, employee, or neighbor, and in all cases the stalking began after the relationship had soured or there was a perception by the stalker of mistreatment. There have been other classifications of stalkers and convicted stalkers have been interviewed/examined by mental health professionals. The reasons or triggers that induce people to become stalkers is a body of mental health science that is presently evolving.

Psychological effects on victims

Disruptions in daily life necessary to escape the stalker, including changes in employment, residence and phone numbers, may take a toll on the victim's well-being and lead to a sense of isolation.

Cyberstalking

Cyberstalking is a technologically-based "attack" on one person who has been targeted specifically for that attack for reasons of anger, revenge or control.

Cyberstalking can take many forms, including:

- harassment, embarrassment and humiliation of the victim
- emptying bank accounts or other economic control such as ruining the victim's credit score
- harassing family, friends and employers to isolate the victim

- scare tactics to instill fear and more.

The term can also apply to a “traditional” stalker who uses technology to trace and locate their victim and their movements more easily (e.g. using Facebook notifications to know what party they are attending).

Examples

- In 2003 a US woman sought protection after claiming that someone had provided her personal information (including her description and location) to men via an online dating service. The victim discovered the identity theft when she was contacted by a man who said they had arranged a casual encounter through the Lavalife.com dating service. Shortly thereafter she was contacted by a second man following chat with 'her' about arranging a separate encounter. She commented "You don't even have to own a computer to be the victim of an Internet crime any more."

- A 44 year old publishing executive named Claire Miller was harassed by strangers who were responding to verging-on-pornographic promises someone had made in her name online. These postings included her home address and telephone number.

- A Glendale businessman stalked his ex-girlfriend using the GPS tracking device on a cell phone. He purchased a Nextel phone device that has a motion switch on it that turns itself on when it moves. As long as the device was on, it transmitted a signal every minute to the GPS satellite, which in turn sent the location information to a computer. The ex planted the phone underneath her car, paid for a service to send him the information and would log on to a website to monitor her location. The victim would suddenly ‘bump’ into him at the coffee shop, LAX, even the cemetery. She knew something was up — it wasn’t hard to realize as he was also phoning her 200 times a day — but police couldn’t help her. It was only when she called police after seeing him

under her car that she got action (he was trying to change the cell phone battery).

- Amy Lynn Boyer was found by her stalker using online technology. Liam Youens was able to get Boyer’s place of employment and SSN by paying an online investigations agency a mere \$154.00. They easily obtained her relevant information from a credit agency report and gave it to Youens. None of the people giving out Boyer’s personal information took responsibility to find out why Youens needed it. This is why: Youens went to Amy Boyer’s workplace, shot and killed her.

What to do when you’re the victim of stalking?

Unfortunately, law enforcement agencies generally lack the human and fiscal resources to provide victims with round-the-clock protection. Law enforcement agencies can, however, assist the stalking victim in a panoply of ways short of providing personal protection. After investigating the complaint, they can best assist the stalking victim by:

- Advising the victim to maintain a diary or daily log of the stalker’s activities;
- Ensuring the victim is aware of both civil and criminal remedies;
- Assisting victims in enhancing personal security;
- Advising victims to be alert for unusual packages or boxes that arrive at their home or workplace;
- Advising victims that phone numbers should be changed and unlisted;
- Advising that trusted neighbors, co-workers, and family members be alerted;
- Advising them to avoid any patterns of exercise or other activities in the neighborhood;
- Advising them that keys and locks should be inventoried and accounted for and locks should be changed accordingly;
- Advising them to obtain a mobile phone;
- Advising victims to park in well-lighted areas, visually check the car every time entering and leaving it, and lock both the

car and the garage at all times;
 •Advising them to drive to the nearest law enforcement agency if followed by a stalker (12).

Conclusion:

The successful management of stalking requires cooperation between health professionals and others in the criminal justice system. It should include a comprehensive risk assessment addressing motivation, persistence, and likelihood of violence. Some individuals will cease the behavior after a period of detention or if threatened with arrest. Factors which may increase risk, such as substance misuse, can be addressed in their own right, while neuroleptic medication may have a role if psychotic symptoms are evident, and low dose neuroleptics can be effective even in the absence of psychosis. Similarly, intrusive thoughts about the victim may improve after treatment with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. Mental health professionals can therefore usefully support others involved in risk management.

Victims of stalkers may consult general practitioners. Doctors need to be aware of the psychological sequelae of being stalked and the legal protections available for victims and be able to direct them to local support groups.

The effects of stalkers on their victims are immense and can result in significant psychiatric morbidity. Only recently, however, has the behaviour become the subject of scientific study, and research remains in its infancy. We know little about who is most vulnerable to becoming a stalker, and more needs to be known about treatment and risk management. Stalking provides good material for literature and films, but the effects in real life can be very damaging.

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