

# Stalking (obsessive pursuit)

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**Stalking behaviour has long been recognized as causing great distress and prolonged psychological problems in many victims. Individuals subjected to stalking often feel powerless and helpless in the face of such unwelcome intrusions into their daily lives. There now seems to be a greater awareness and understanding of the phenomenon which, in turn, may encourage individuals affected to seek help.**

**D**espite its seemingly recent prominence in the media and as a theme for fiction, drama and cinematic ventures, stalking behaviour is not new (Enoch and Trethowan, 1979; Meloy, 1999). Yet there is a dearth of scientific evaluation of this phenomenon, the majority of studies focusing on the characteristics of stalkers. A random survey in the USA estimated that 8% of women and 2% of men have been stalked at some stage in their lives (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1997). In the UK a telephone crisis line received over 6 000 calls from victims during a 2-year period (Allen, 1996).

### DEFINITION

Stalking is typically defined as the wilful, malicious and repeated following and harassment of another person that threatens his/her safety (Meloy and Gothard, 1995). Harassment refers to a stream of unrelated, unwanted, annoying, minor offences. Nonetheless, stalking scenarios involve a series of individual acts, e.g. intimidating phone calls, unsolicited mail, loitering in the victim's vicinity or damage to personal property, which have an additive effect over time (Pathe and Mullen, 1997). Most stalkers are male with women predominantly the targets. In some cases the pursuant behaviour is so persistent and traumatic that victims may feel compelled to leave their homes and even emigrate.

### PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR

Stalking usually affects the ordinary citizen, contrary to popular belief that celebrities are mainly affected. Stalkers do often focus their attention on public figures, including entertainers and political leaders. Public figures sometimes have a constant onslaught of unwanted attention from stalkers in search of identity and contact. In addition to death threats, stalkers may damage personal property

including cars, clothing and photographs. Stalking behaviour may continue for years.

Stalkers may be obsessed fans, divorced or separated spouses, neighbours or disgruntled defendants as well as complete strangers. Whatever the background such individuals may not only issue threats and spread rumours but also uncover ex-directory telephone numbers, street and e-mail addresses and even social security numbers, seemingly with apparent ease via the Internet (cyberstalking).

The majority of stalking relates to failed relationships (Abrams and Robinson, 1998). Often unnoticed initially, victims soon come to realize they are being stalked at home, the workplace and any other location until ultimately all aspects of their lives are disrupted. The tone of communication may progress from faithful adoration to eventual threats, physical assault and even homicide.

### AETIOLOGY

Possible aetiological factors include cruel and violent parental background, rejection in childhood by parents, contact with the criminal justice system, comorbid substance misuse leading to pathological jealousy, admission to a mental health unit, unrequited sexual relationships and a perceived sense of social isolation. Anger, jealousy and a need to control are common themes identified in clinical studies of stalkers (Kienlen et al, 1997).

### CLASSIFICATION

Attempts have been made to delineate a stalker profile to include erotomania, borderline erotomania, and former intimates (simple obsessional), although there are several overlapping groups (McCann, 1998; Mullen et al, 1999).

Erotomania is the least common disorder, accounting for probably only 10% of stalkers. In

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erotomania (a subtype of delusional disorder), the individual (typically a woman pursuing a male stranger, often of higher status) believes the victim is in love with her, despite evidence to the contrary. The harassment continues unabated, sometimes for years. The infatuation preoccupies the individual to the exclusion of all other interests, and the persistent pursuit of the victim leads to gradual overwhelming intrusion. With borderline erotomania (love obsessional) some history of emotional engagement with the target may have occurred, albeit innocuous. For example, a simple glance may be sufficient reason for the unwanted advances. The behaviour patterns and thought processes of such individuals may range from normal to delusional.

### PROFILES

The commonest category (80%) is that of former intimate stalkers (simple obsessional) who fixate on their partners/ex-partners and will not let go, or rather refuse to be rejected. Such stalkers are usually emotionally immature males who suffer from low self-esteem and are prone to morbid jealousy. One study concluded that this group had the highest rate of substance abuse and personality disorders (narcissistic, borderline, sociopathic) (Zona et al, 1998). Mood disorders are also prominent in this group.

Most stalkers are not psychotic when stalking. Serial killers and serial rapists fit into the broad category of sociopathic personality disorder. Their motivations are unclear as they do not appear to be trying to establish an intimate relationship with their victims, and tend to seek targets who fit their premeditated assault criteria. Simple obsessional stalkers need to heighten their self-esteem by controlling their victims. Such individuals are also dangerous and the risk of homicide, although small, is real. In addition, the current lover or spouse of the victim, or other third party may be targeted in an attempt to rid the stalker of the obstacle to reunification. There are occasional individuals who claim to be victims of stalking whose allegations are later held to be unfounded (Pathe et al, 1999).

### KEY POINTS

- Males comprise the majority of stalkers and most victims are females.
- The commonest form of stalking involves males who have had a previous intimate relationship with a female.
- Nuisance mail, threatening phone calls and physical following are common patterns of stalking. Use of e-mail and the Internet is becoming more common.
- Psychiatric disorders are common although most stalkers are not psychotic when offending. Psychological therapies will only benefit stalkers who want to change.
- Victims of stalking frequently suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

### OUTCOME

Many victims are hesitant to report stalking incidents because of lack of faith in the legal system, or because they fear retaliation from the stalker. Attempts to rationalize with the stalker should be avoided as this may act as a positive reinforcer and increase the likelihood of further stalking. However, victims should endeavour to take responsibility and document all actions of the stalker, including written communications and threatening or menacing phone calls.

Legal advice should be sought and a court injunction issued when possible, although such measures (even incarceration) are not always a deterrent and may fuel the stalker's narcissistic rage. Discussions of practical measures (involving friends or the police, or joining a support group) to cope with the harassment, and specific cognitive approaches to deal with the major mental health consequences may benefit victims as post-traumatic stress disorder (depression, panic feelings, hypervigilance, recurrent intrusive flashbacks) is a frequent occurrence (Westrup et al, 1999). Psychological intervention may be appropriate for stalkers who want to change, although a background of enduring personality traits and/or mental illness harbour a poor prognosis.

### CONCLUSION

New laws can do little to protect individuals against the plethora of Internet searches dedicated to tracking down people. Hopefully, the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 may at least offer victims quicker protection. **HM**

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