Reclaiming Control in Stalking Cases

ABSTRACT
Some common myths about stalking are debunked on the basis of research. In light of such research, stalking is examined in terms of its prevalence, the degree to which it is a gendered phenomenon, the tactics stalkers use in their pursuit, the effects of such unwanted pursuit on victims, and the tactics victims typically use to manage such pursuit. Recommendations are made regarding these strategies.

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There is virtually no evidence that stalking and unwanted pursuit constitute an escalating scourge or epidemic. There is little basis for defining stalking as "the" crime of the information age or of "modern society." There is no support for the belief that celebrities constitute a substantial proportion of stalking victims. Evidence does not indicate that typical stalkers are crazed and delusional. There is not even particularly compelling justification for viewing stalking as exclusively a "women's issue." Such conclusions are, in part, merely a product of the phenomenon being only a little more than a decade old in its legal precedence.

BACKGROUND

Large-scale surveys and case studies have been conducted in the United States (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), Canada (Kong, 1996), Great Britain (Budd & Martinson, 2000), and Australia (McLennan, 1995/1996; Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2002). Collectively, the more conservative estimates indicate approximately 8% to 13% of women and 2% to 8% of men have been or can expect to be stalked.

When the broader research literature is examined, typically the same types of victimization at higher rates than currently estimated but are not identified as stalking victims.

The average duration of such episodes is close to 2 years (Spitzberg, 2002). Imagine for a moment—for 2 years, more than 700 days and nights, never knowing whether answering the next telephone call, walking to one's car, turning around the next corner, opening up one's mailbox, opening the next e-mail, or showing up at one's workplace, gym, or classroom may entail an encounter with someone engaged in a campaign of intrusion, threats, and even possible violence. This is a mere glimpse into the nightmare stalking can become.

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STALKING BEHAVIOR

The sheer creativity stalkers reveal in their campaigns of intimidation and intrusion is remarkable. According to Cupach, Spitzberg, and Carson (2000), Spitzberg (2002), and Spitzberg and Cupach (2001, 2002), stalkers intrude through any or all of the following forms:

- Hyperintimacy.
- Surveillance and pursuit.
- Invasion.
- Intimidation and harassment.
- Proxy pursuit.
• Coercion.
• Violence.

Hyperintimacy is exemplified by the difference between an occasional telephone call and a dozen calls per day or a single rose with a note expressing attraction and 3 dozen roses with a card professing a fated unity of spirits. One of the more insidious features of most stalking is it often begins as behavior that mimics ordinary courtship. As the courtship behavior reveals increasingly excessive features of intimacy, it simultaneously suggests inappropriate pursuit.

Surveillance and pursuit involve following and investigating. This includes behaviors such as driving by victims’ residences, checking up on their whereabouts, waiting at places they frequent, and discovering their routines, hobbies, and preferences. Invasion is the process of violating individuals’ physical, environmental, or symbolic privacy, including rifling through their schedule book or diary, or breaking into their desk, residence, or e-mail. Intimidation and harassment include various attempts to bother and harangue the object of pursuit. For example, stalkers sometimes send implicit threats in the form of bizarre gifts or subscriptions, or they charge their victims with harassment or theft to preempt their credibility.

Proxy pursuit is the process of gaining the willing or unwitting assistance of others in the stalking process. Stalkers often enlist their friends or families in keeping tabs on the objects of pursuit, and they sometimes inveigle their way into the social and family networks of the individuals they are pursuing.

The language of coercion is the vocabulary of threats in the interest of compliance. Any action that explicitly attempts to force individuals to do something because of the implied harms of noncompliance demonstrates coercive behavior. Finally, although only a minority of all stalking becomes violent, violence is always a possibility. With such ingredients, stalkers can concoct an almost infinite number of strategies in their pursuit of others.

**VICTIM RESPONSES**

**Negative and Positive Effects**

These toxic behaviors have various effects on their victims. Research indicates that 20% and 65% of stalking victims tend to experience any or all of the following effects (Spitzberg, 2002). General disturbance represents a broad disruption of quality of life and is reflected in increases in measures of posttraumatic stress disorder and unpleasant lifestyle changes. Emotional effects involve disruptions of affect and affect regulation, including, but not limited to, anxiety, fear, and depression. Stalking also may have negative cognitive effects that impair thought and perceptual processes. Lowered self-esteem, confusion, distrust, and irrational belief systems (e.g., paranoia) exemplify cognitive effects. Such cognitive and emotional disturbances can, in turn, impair physical health (e.g., eating disorders, sleeping disorders, digestive distress, stress disorders).

Although often overlooked, social effects represent distress caused to victims’ network of social and familial relations. Victims lose friends both because they isolate themselves and because stalkers sometimes victimize the friends. As victims change jobs or residences, invest in home security, or lose their jobs due to the other stalking effects, they experience economic effects. Finally, although some victims may experience resilience in the form of stronger core relationships with friends and family and a heightened sense of personal

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• You have no interest in maintaining a relationship.

• You will have no further contact or correspondence with the pursuer.

• If the pursuit continues, you will explore legal options.
safety, such silver linings are unlikely to outweigh the detriments caused by the victimization.

Alternating Roles
Stalking victims are not without their own arsenal of defenses. However, free societies experience an ongoing dialectic between the right to privacy and the rights of speech, movement, and assembly. Stalkers often creatively tread the balance beam of this dialectic, careful to avoid acts that either require or justify legal intervention or imprisonment. Consequently, in almost no other potentially violent crime are victims so responsible not only for their own protection but also for the evidentiary and probative case characteristics associated with legal intervention. In addition, to manage the often murky waters of law enforcement assistance, victims must alternate between being reactive, helpless (i.e., “perfect”) victims and being proactively assertive individuals with both their pursuers and the machinery of the legal establishment (Dunn, 2002). Therefore, basic questions arise regarding the options available to stalking victims and their relative efficacy.

Coping Actions
According to Spitzberg (2002) and Spitzberg and Cupach (2001, 2002), there are five categories of actions in which victims typically manage and cope with stalking:

- Moving inward.
- Moving outward.
- Moving toward or with.
- Moving against.
- Moving away.

Moving inward often is the product of a harassment campaign. It involves actions such as denial, meditation, and taking drugs. Although the less self-destructive activities may be therapeutic, none of the actions are likely to reduce the victimization process. Moving outward involves contacting third parties, such as friends for social support or protection, law enforcement, or victim advocates. Moving toward or with typically is the first move victims make, trying to “reason with” their pursuers and negotiate a different type of relationship or get their pursuers to stop harassing them. Moving against is victims’ effort to threaten, harm, or otherwise deter their pursuers. For example, obtaining a restraining order can be considered a special case of moving against an unwanted pursuer. Moving away probably is the most common type of response, which is the victims’ attempt to be where their stalkers are not. Changing telephone numbers, using caller identification services, changing travel and hobby routines, and changing addresses are efforts to evade pursuers’ grasp and gaze. Evidence suggests most victims engage in several or all of these types of responses (Cupach & Spitzberg, in press).

One coping action deserves further consideration. Protective or restraining orders often are recommended by law enforcement officials. Such orders improve the position of law enforcement by making violations of the orders a basis for increasing the charges from misdemeanor to felony. Victims may crave protective or restraining orders because taking formal action “feels” proactive and empowering. However, research, mostly in domestic violence populations, reveals approximately 40% of such orders are violated, and as many as 20% are perceived as making matters worse (Spitzberg, 2002).

STRATEGIES FOR HELPING VICTIMS HELP THEMSELVES
Despite this toolbox of management tactics, the average
stalking case still lasts almost 2 years. Apparently, such attempts to manage stalking behavior often reinforce it. Although research still is investigating the particular timing, sequence, and implementation of these activities to increase their effectiveness, experts recommend a variety of strategies to help victims protect themselves. These strategies and practices can be alliteratively listed as:

- Caution.
- Competence.
- Communication.
- Control.
- Closure.

**Competence**

Competence means it is important to equip oneself with knowledge. Victims should read some of the rapidly expanding literature, written by both experts and laypeople (e.g., Davis, 2001; Davis & Frieze, 2000; de Becker, 1997; Dunn, 2002; Meloy, 1998); learn the laws regarding stalking, harassment, and terrorist threats in their jurisdiction; explore victim services available in their areas; and study the Web sites devoted to helping stalking victims cope. Many of the recommendations available from such expert sources involve common sense, but laypeople rarely think of all the possible safeguards themselves.

**Communication**

Communication is the third strategy. If the victims have not done so already, they should communicate with their pursuers one last time. They must express as concisely and assertively (but not aggressively) as possible that they have no interest in maintaining a relationship; they will have no further contact or correspondence with the pursuers; and if the stalkers continue their pursuit, they will explore legal options. From that point forward, victims should do everything within their control to not talk to, interact with, or be in the same place as the pursuers. If the stalkers continue their pursuit through notes and gifts, the victims should keep them for their evidentiary and probative value. However, they should not accept them if they imply providing information about themselves or interacting with the pursuers.

This strategy also means victims need to communicate their situation to everyone they know who may be used or contacted by the pursuers and let them know the pursuers are considered a potential threat. If the victims work, they should report the potential threat to management. If the victims are students, they should report the potential threat to campus police. If the victims are citizens, they should report the potential threat to law enforcement and victim services.

**Control**

Victims also must control their environment and themselves. They can take steps toward hardening* and hiding the target. Strategies include obtaining a post office box, caller identification services, an unlisted telephone number, a new and unlist-

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* A military term meaning to armor a target, making it more difficult to hit or hurt.
Shred your mail, carry a cellular telephone, and consider carrying devices such as pepper spray or shock systems (if you also undergo self-defense training).

Improve security technology in your car, home, and office.

Change your door locks and install window locks.

ed address, and a new e-mail address, and workplace reassignment. Victims should change their routines; alter their routes to work, school, gym, and religious services; park in different parking structures or lots; and join friends when going out or returning to their cars. If they have a photograph of their pursuers, they can make copies for their friends, families, colleagues, or others who could encounter their pursuers.

They can control their own behavior by taking the risk seriously. Victims should be cognizant of their mail correspondence, visibility, and exposure to others. They should shred their mail, carry cellular telephones, and consider carrying devices such as pepper spray or shock systems, if they also undergo self-defense training. Other tactics are to improve security technology in their car, residence, and office; change the locks of their residence and office; and install window locks. Victims should inform security at their workplaces and residence, if applicable. Actions such as these may seem either obvious or overreactive. In the event of continued stalking, they are neither, and if they work, they are worth the investment of time, effort, and money.

Closure

Finally, closure means it is important to achieve a sense of completion, so victims can experience some return of normalcy in their lives. Unfortunately, a sinister aspect of stalking is the apprehension that it may never be "over." Legal intervention, particularly restraining orders, sometimes work and sometimes do not. In addition, occasionally the involvement of law enforcement is perceived by stalkers as an escalation requiring an escalation on their part. Nevertheless, law enforcement involvement can be effective and probably should be initiated. However, formal legal intervention should be engaged with great caution. In such a situation, short of imprisonment of the stalker, closure means moving from a perspective of victimization to a perspective of survivorship.

Victims are reactive, whereas survivors are proactive. Victims feel disempowered by other individuals and circumstances. In contrast, survivors feel empowered by their own actions. Victims fear the next unpredictable threat, and survivors cautiously believe they can prepare for the future. Victims are prisoners of the past, present and future, whereas survivors learn from the past, find pleasure and efficacy in the present, and believe the future is theirs.

There is little signage to indicate the road to survivorship, but the fact that some victims are more resilient than others indicates such pathways do exist. Seeking the advice and therapeutic guidance of professional counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, trauma specialists, or mental health care professionals likely will help victims travel this path. Research shows stalking victims almost always confide in friends but rarely confide in professionals (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Clearly, the road to healthy survivorship is likely to be facilitated by professional insights friends and family rarely can provide. Stalkers are unlikely to receive life sentences for their crimes, so it becomes vital to ensure their victims do not receive life sentences of fear and threat.

CONCLUSION

After years of studying stalking as a social phenomenon, a particular feature of the process stands out to the author as peculiar. In our society at this time, it is wide-
KEY POINTS

1. The majority of stalking victims are women, and most stalkers are men. However, the number of male victims may be significantly underestimated.

2. Stalking tends to take any or all of the following forms—hyperintimacy, pursuit and surveillance, invasion, intimidation and harassment, proxy pursuit, coercion, and violence.

3. Stalking produces many negative effects including emotional, cognitive, physical, social, and economic impairments.

4. Victims cope with stalking in a variety of ways, including moving away, moving toward, moving against, moving inward, or moving outward. Victims should consider using the following strategies: caution, competence, communication, control, and closure.

Do you agree with this article? Disagree? Have a comment or questions? Send an e-mail to Karen Stanwood, Managing Editor, at kstanwood@slackinc.com. We’re waiting to hear from you!


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