

Stalking: A treatment approach for offenders

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Abstract

It is estimated, that between 10 and 15% of the entire population experience stalking in their life. After the recent implementation of legal approaches to prevent stalking and the increasing understanding of the psychological reasons leading to stalking behavior, there is a need to establish specific treatment approaches for stalkers. Based on insecure attachment behavior and impaired executive functions due to reduced impulse control the presenter discusses preliminary treatment experiences with stalkers.

As stalkers usually are not motivated to change their offensive behavior, a treatment concept must be based on legal obligations, which helps providing effective interventions. By establishing common goals the stalker's motivation increases gradually during the treatment process. In most cases the treatment goals are directly derived from the aim of the stalking behavior: e.g. wish for an intimate relationship, need for an employment, etc. The treatment helps the stalker to achieve his goals - in a socially acceptable way. In addition to the cognitive behavioral intervention technique a variety of other approaches such as social skill training, assertiveness training, etc., are part of the approach.

What do we know about stalkers?

First of all, stalking effects many more people than first thought. It doesn't just effect some well known celebrities, as often suggested by media reports. It is often not the unknown stranger, who commits stalking – in 70% of all stalking cases the victims knows the offender (Kartte S. quoted in Kudlik 2002, p.8).

Stalking is not a disease, rather it is an unacceptable behavior, which affects the personal integrity and safety of the victim(s). Stalking is not a singular event, rather it can be understood as a chain of different behaviors which all have the same aim: to manipulate or to force the victim to undertake what the offender desires.

The vast majority of stalkers deny that their behavior is threatening towards the victim, rather they declare that it is pure love and similar cognitive distortions. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is no motivation to change their behavior. Without clear legal obligations and disciplinary punishment (parole laws, Massnahme-Recht) stalkers will not undergo treatment.

As many stalkers suffer from attachment problems and the resulting social impairment, treatment motivation will increase when they realize they are able to create intimate relationships. From this point of view motivation is no longer a pre-condition for a successful treatment, rather the treatment itself helps and improves the motivation. Building motivation is therefore part of the therapeutic intervention technique.

What is stalking?

Stalking is a repetitive behavior which leads to fear and/or a feeling of being threatened, trapped and helpless. For the victims side this causes dramatic changes in their personal / professional life, e.g. having to move home, giving up their job, avoiding public places, and this is just to mention a few of the effects. In many cases the effected person develops severe psychiatric disorders, such as sleep disorders, controlling stress, depression, anxiety disorders, and somatic problems (eating disorders, chronic pain disorders, headaches, cardial problems).

The stalking behavior is initiated and determined by the stalker – the victim's reactions often leads to an increase both in the severity and the intensity of the stalking behavior. By discussing this, it is not intended to blame the victims, rather to help them to set clear boundaries before things get worse.

Stalking is not a single "occurrence", rather it is a chain of events. Most of them are not criminal per se, e.g. to offer someone flowers, to call someone, to write love letters to someone. Only the complex behavior pattern is what constitutes stalking.

Traditionally stalking was considered as a symptom of an underlying disease, e.g. erotomania. Understanding stalking as a behavior problem per se has opened the door to a new scientific approach – which leads to the formulation of anti-stalking laws in the last 15 years. Stalking has now become a criminal offence.

How many people are affected by stalking?

According to a meta-analysis of existing data based on 103 studies with approximately 70'000 victims, 24% of women and 10% of men are effected by stalking at least once in their life (Voss 2004). Thus stalking effects many more persons than first thought. Therefore, there is an urgent need for intervention strategies in stalking,.

How do we understand stalking behavior?

Stalking is not a disease. Stalking is a criminal offence. According to a study by Kamphuis et al. (2004) over 80% of all offenders seemed to have no psychiatric disorder at the time when the stalking occurred. Stalking is not a new phenomenon (Leong 1994). Focusing on the stalking behavior helps to overcome the rather academic discussion about its origin, and helps find therapeutic approaches for the stalking offenders.

About half of all stalking cases develop from an intimate relationship. Not surprisingly, there are many overlaps with domestic violence, therefore. 60% of female victims and 30% of male victims are stalked by a former lover (von Pechstaed, quoted in Kudlik, 2002, p.9). The other half of the stalking victims are observed in the workplace. It overlaps with workplace violence, such as bullying/mobbing.

According to the literature about 80% of the offenders in severe stalking are men. Most stalkers seems to have great difficulties accepting a simple "no". The executive function in these men is somehow impaired. Stalkers intend to impose power over an other person. They want to force a person to behave in the way they desire. Several studies have clearly indicated that many stalkers suffer from attachment problems in their life (Lewis et al. 2001, Dye et al. 2003, Kamphuis 2004). This offers an understanding of the stalking behavior in many cases. People with insecure

attachment pattern show exactly this characteristic interaction problem. Stalking always takes place within a relationship – you cannot stalk without an other person.

What answers do we have against stalking?

There is no single answer. There is no absolute protection against stalking. Anybody can be targeted by a stalker. It is crucial how society protects its citizens against stalking. There is no question, that only when an anti-stalking law is implemented stalking is understood to be a criminal offence. Such anti-stalking law leads to appropriate reactions by law enforcement authorities, it helps to protect potential victims, and it provides the basis for an effective management of stalkers. However, an antistalking law does not lead to effective intervention in stalking cases, it is more a kind of a foundation for further intervention strategies.

As Gail Robinson (2004) pointed out, the greatest impact on victim protection has been the implementation of specialised police teams: TMU (threat management units). The anti-stalking law is only brought into effect by the law enforcement authorities, otherwise it is just a piece of paper. An experienced police team focuses much more on the entire stalking process with the threat on effected persons. Police intervention is of great help in stalking cases; often only their presence by “just knocking at the stalker’s door” is enough to bring the stalking behavior to an end. Besides this there is a lot of advice for victims which might help to stop stalking.

Advices for victims (victim treatment):

- Absolutely no contact with the stalker
- Informing neighbours, co-workers, relatives and friends
- Installing a second telephone line/mobile phone – the old one is reserved for the stalker
- Documenting in detail all occurrences
- Saving proof, including photographic documentation of any damage
- Making an allegation in case of physical threats and attacks
- All injuries and psychological reactions should be carefully documented by physicians
- In case of ongoing threats contacting experienced professionals for advise and help

The therapeutic intervention helps victims to overcome their ambivalent feelings towards their offender – often ex-lovers, where they might believe that just “talking to each other” is the only way to find a solution. The result is opposite to this expectation – any contact with the stalker increases their fixation on the targeted victim. Any attempt for mediation must be absolutely avoided, therefore. Both victims and professionals have to be informed about stalking and which preventive strategies are effective.

An finally, the treatment of stalkers is an important cornerstone and major part of any intervention strategy. Treating stalkers is one of the most effective way to protect potential victims.

Treatment concept

A scientific based therapeutic approach requires a hypothesis for the social interaction failure of stalking-offenders. An offence-focused treatment approach provides a new framework for the management of stalkers. Following the implementation of anti-stalking laws several treatment concepts have been developed. Westrup (1998, 2000) suggested a narrow behavioral approach based on operant conditioning. The concept is, that the behavior is determined by the resulting consequences – whether they are positive or negative. A much more detailed concept based on a cognitive-behavioral treatment approach was published by Mullen, Pathé and Purcell (2000), elaborated in a clinical setting.

An offence-focused treatment approach is based on the stalking behavior per se – and not on personality traits, underlying illness, or the motivation for the stalking behavior. Stalking is based on a “planned” behavior, where the stalking-offender invests great energy and time. In a German study 40% of the participants have indicated, that the stalker had tried to get into contact with the victim several times a day (Wondrak 2004).

The motivation of stalkers to change their behavior is minimal to zero. This is definitively not a favorable condition for an effective treatment result. Without a clear legal framework and disciplinary punishment (parole law, Massnahme-Recht) a treatment will fail.

An effective treatment approach is based on an assessment by gathering and providing the following data:

- biographical data, including attachment experiences, social and financial situation, employment, previous conviction(s)
- insight into the unacceptable behavior
- motivation for a behavior change
- underlying explanations and motivations for the stalking behavior (e.g. what goal has the stalking behavior?)
- violence risk assessment
- general risk of relapse

An assessment is not a finding of facts! It is based on a collaboration between stalker and the professional providing the assessment. This approach is contrary to the legal right of an accused person, which is not to participate in a criminal investigation towards oneself. The answer to this dilemma is that, similarly the treatment cannot be performed without cooperation, therefore neither can be the assessment. As the relapse prevention is in the interest of the offender, the treatment is in his interest as well. This offers help and support towards the goal which is to avoid further difficulties by increasing the ability and skill to socially interact and to build intimate relationship. It must be clear for the participating offender, that the result of the assessment may not be in his interest. The cooperation in the assessment process is a predictor for a successful outcome.

Based on the assessment an individual treatment plan is developed. A treatment contract clarifies rights and duties, e.g. setting, confidentiality, drop-out, termination. The treatment can be performed either in an out-patient or a clinical setting. However, some of the offenders are not treatable.

In the case of underlying diseases these have to be treated first, then the offence-focused treatment follows. The treatment concept is based on a semistructured approach, which means, that the therapist conducts the treatment according to the individual needs. The modular structure offers a path, that all the relevant aspects are covered by the treatment.

The 24 moduls of the offence-focused approach:

1. stalker treatment concept
2. attachment experiences and stalking
3. boundaries
4. epidemiology
5. psychotraumatology
6. victims in the aftermath
7. treatment of victims
8. how does stalking begin?
9. fantasies among stalkers
10. masks used by stalkers
11. escalation spiral
12. offence reconstruction

13. understanding the motivation
14. 20 steps
15. 20 steps – again
16. legal aspects
17. gender aspects among stalkers
18. violent behavior: stalking - domestic violence – workplace violence – mobbing/bullying
19. guilt and new beginning
20. relapse prevention
21. own escalation spiral
22. risk-management and self-management
23. responsibility
24. evaluation, termination ritual

In addition to the cognitive behavioral technique psychoeducative interventions are part of the treatment program, as well as social skill and assertiveness training. If necessary the treatment program has to be adapted to cover individual needs.

Future developments: Five bridges to cross

To successfully implement a stalking treatment program at least five important and related aspects have to be considered:

- anti-stalking law
- disciplinary punishment (parole law)
- stalking units (TMU)
- curricular integration
- training of professionals

Contrary to the development in English spoken nations, so far the greater part of European nations have failed to implement anti-stalking laws. The existing articles in the criminal code are only sufficient in cases of physical or verbal violence, harassing, threats, and damage of properties. An anti-stalking law provides means against the underlying dynamic of stalking behavior (e.g. threatening behavior, loitering). As long as there is no violation of the criminal code, the police cannot intervene. They don't have the legal legitimation to effectively stop the stalking behavior. According to a German study, about 30% of all stalking victims contacted the police – 70% among them reported, that the police didn't help them (Biermann 2005).

Disciplinary punishment (parole law, Massnahme-Recht) is part of the anti-stalking law. It is important to have the legal means for mandatory treatment, especially in cases where there is no diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder.

The law enforcement authorities need to implement "stalking units" (TMU). This are specialised police teams focused on stalking. Often this raises concerns about financial and personal resources among political decision makers (Ressourcenproblem). In analogy with domestic violence the benefit of specially trained police stalking-intervention teams is more then evident (at least according to existing TMU's, and from victim's experiences). The first European TMU has been implemented by Helsinki police department, others can be found in UK, and in Bremen (Germany).

Facing the magnitude of stalking there is an urgent need for a curricular integration into traditional formation among the involved disciplines, firstly of all medicine, law and forensic/criminalistic science.

And last but not least professionals have to be trained in handling stalking (physicians, psychotherapists, police, attorneys, judges, lawyers). Knowledge is a sine qua non condition for an effective threat management in each case and for implementing preventive strategies.

Suggested readings

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