

STALKING AND ITS EFFECTS

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Objective: To examine the social, occupational, psychological and emotional effects of stalking.

Method: A group of 100 subjects of stalking who attended psychiatry O.P.D. at Jinnah Hospital and Private Clinic of the authors for advice and help were included in this study.

Subject: One hundred subjects (88 females and 12 males) with age range 18-45 years from city of Lahore.

Results: Majority of the victims were subjected to multiple forms of harassment including being followed, repeatedly approached, received many letters and telephone calls for period varying from 6 weeks to 6 months. Threats were received by 58 subjects and 38 were physically assaulted; majority (94%) victims made major changes in their social and work lives with 52% having decreased work capacity and 12% moving their place of residence. Increased levels of anxiety were reported by 83%, aggressive or guilt thoughts 65%, intrusive recollections by 55%, with changes in appetite 48%, disturbance in sleep 74% and suicidal ruminations were acknowledged by 12% of the subjects. Forty seven percent full filled criteria for diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder with further 38% having the evidence of numbness to responses.

Conclusion: This study indicates the extent of the social, occupational and psychological damage sustained by the subjects of persistent stalking and underlines the inadequacy of current legal, medical responses to the needs of these subjects.

KEY WORDS: Stalking; Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome; Mental Health.

INTRODUCTION

Stalking is described as constellation of behaviors in which one individual inflicts on

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another repeated unwanted intrusions and communications. The intrusions can involve loitering nearby, maintaining surveillance and making approaches. The communications can be through letters, telephone, electronic mail, or notes attached to the victim's belongings. These stalking behaviors may be associated with other forms of harassment such as chasing, teasing, whistling, interfering with their property and making false accusations. Specific or implied threats to the safety of the objects of these attentions may be made, physical and sexual assaults may also occur. Third parties, including friends and relatives of the victim may also attract threats and violence from the stalker.^{1,2}

Stalking is of concern to mental health professionals both because of the frequency with which such behavior emerges as a result of a mental disorder in the perpetrator and because of the potential impact on the mental health of

the victim. Studies have been published, but little systematic information has been gathered on victims.^{3,4} These studies of stalkers suggest rates of assault varying from 21 to 36%.^{5,6} The focus on the risks of stalkers inflicting physical and sexual assaults on their victims is understandable, but there has been only some data published on the psychological toll that stalking itself inflicts on the victims.^{7,8,9}

This paper focuses on the impact of stalking on the victim's psychological, social and interpersonal functioning.

METHOD

The cases included in the study were involved in multiple episodes over a minimum of six weeks, and involved more than one form of intrusive behavior. The subjects included in this study were those who attended Psychiatric Out-patient Department of Jinnah Hospital and private clinic of the authors for advice and help during the period Jan 2000 to December 2000.

The 30-item questionnaire explored: basic epidemiological data from the victim and where known, for the stalker, the nature and duration of the harassment, the prior relationship between victim and stalker, possible stalker motives, the impact of the stalking on the victim's health and lifestyle, as well as help sought and its perceived efficacy.

The data were initially summarized with basic descriptive statistics. Subsequently Pearson's chi-square test and Fisher's exact test where appropriate were used to analyze categorical data. All calculations were performed using SYSTAT for Windows, version 5.05 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL; 1994).

RESULTS

The victims

There were 88 female and 12 male subjects who reported duration of stalking varying between 6 weeks to 6 months (median 10 weeks), with 52 of the 100 victims experiencing ongoing stalking. In 10 cases females stalked the female victims. A high proportion of victims

(36%) were employed in professions such as medicine, teaching and the banking. The stalkers were ex-colleagues of the victims in 29 instances (Table-I). Twenty five subjects first encountered their stalker through a professional relationship, 25 in other work-related contexts, 20 had casual social encounters, 16 were neighbors and 10 had no knowledge of any prior contact with their stalker.

Table- I: Stalkers and their victims
n = 100

Profession	Number
Ex-colleagues	29
Professional relationship	25
Others work related	25
Social encounters	20
Neighbours	16
No knowledge	10

Mode of behaviors

All subjects reported multiple forms of harassment, (Table-II). Repeated unwanted communications involved telephone calls in 78%, in many instances the caller hung up immediately, remained silent or attempted to engage the victim in conversation embodying declarations of love, obscenities and/or threats. Calls were typically received at inconvenient times, especially in the early morning hours or late at night or at victims' workplace. Employed victims including professionals were more likely than other occupational group to receive harassing telephone calls (P=0.016).

Table - II: Stalkers Behavior
n = 100

Forms of harassment	Number
Repeated unwanted communications	78
Followed or kept under surveillance	71
Direct approach	70
Multiple letters	62
Unsolicited material received	50
Property damages	36

Of the subjects, 71% had been followed or were kept under surveillance by their stalkers, most often waiting outside the victim's home school, work place or driving past speedily in a car. Professionals were less likely to be subject to this form of harassment relative to victims in other occupational categories ($P=0.009$).

Direct approaches were reported by 70% of victims, most often at their home, school or workplace. Several stalkers expressed their love, pleaded for a relationship or reconciliation, or were threatening and abusive.

Letters were sent to 62% of the subjects, some receiving multiple letters in a day. Professionally employed victims received electronic mail from their stalkers.

Unsolicited material was received by 50% of subjects in the form of audiotapes, gifts of perfume, confectionery, soft toys, artificial jewelry, food parcels, flowers and the photos, typically featuring the victims. Property damage was claimed by 36% of the victims. Damage to cars was relatively common, victim's homes were another common target.

Threats and assaults

Table-III shows threatening and assaultive behaviors of stalkers. In 58 cases, stalkers had made overt threats, 14 being directed at the

victim only, seven at the victim's family and friends, and in a further 37 cases directed both at the victim and third parties. In 30 cases the stalker threatened to discredit the victim by spreading malicious gossip to their family, friends, landlord, employer and various government agencies. Forty-two victims said they had been assaulted by their stalker, 38 physically and four sexually. Violence was in the majority of cases directed at the object of obsessive concern and two subjects were abducted by their stalkers and two attempted burning. Prior threats were received by 26 of the 38 victims of personal violence. Violence was more likely when there had been a former relationship between victim and stalker ($P=0.007$).

Assistance Sought

All victims sought help or advice from one or more sources: 70 turned to family and/or friends; 32 approached work colleagues or supervisors; 22 to the police; 18 passers by; 13 neighbours; 10 medical practitioners and 02 consulted lawyers (Table IV).

The victim's appraisal of the helpfulness of these agencies was mixed, but for the majority their desire to help was not matched by their effectiveness: A significant number of victims who were followed or who suffered property damage sought help from the police ($P=0.001$). There was also a significant relationship between property damage and consultation with police & lawyers ($P=0.005$). There was trend for those victims in receipt of unsolicited material

Table - III: Threats and assaultive behavior

n = 100

Mode of behavior	Number
Overt threats	58
Victim only	14
Victims and third parties	37
Discrediting the victim by spreading malicious gossip	30
Family and friends of victim	7
Assaultive Behavior	42
Physical	34
Sexual	4
Kidnapping	2
Attempted burning	2

Table - IV: Source of assistance

n = 100

Assistance sought	Number
Family and friend	70
Work colleagues	32
Police	22
Passer by	18
Neighbours	13
Lawyers	2

to consult friends and doctors ($P=0.06$). A prior relationship between victim and stalker was also a feature in cases seeking police advice ($P=0.05$), while the assistance of work colleagues or supervisors was infrequently sought except in those cases where the stalking had its origin in the workplace.

Effects of stalking

All victims felt that their stalking experience had a deleterious effect on their psychological, interpersonal and/or occupation functioning, (Table-V). Eighty nine reported major lifestyle changes and 76% had modified their routine activities as a direct consequence of their harassment.

Stalking promoted additional security measures in 73% of cases, which included obtaining new telephone numbers and post box addresses. Five female victims said they had undertaken self-defense courses and two kept weapons under their belt. The work capacity of 70% of victims had decreased, 52% curtailed social outings for fear of encountering their pursuer (Table-V). In 37% of cases, stalking necessitated a change of workplace, school or career, 12% relocated residence and two moved overseas. Aggressive thoughts towards the stalker were entertained by 65% of the subjects, 12% considered attempted suicide; 75% expressed overwhelming feelings of powerlessness.

Table - V: Social and occupational effects of stalking
n=100

Impact	Number
Changes in the life style	89
Modified occupational functioning	76
Prompted additional security	73
Work capacity decreased	70
Curtail of social activities	52
Change of work place	37
Shift in residence	12
Left for overseas	2

Intrusive recollections and vivid flashbacks of their stalking ordeal, which were recurrent and distressing, were reported by 55 subjects. A further 38 subjects described avoidance or numbing responses, particularly detachment and estrangement from others (Table-VI). Most victims reported post traumatic stress symptoms, 47% fulfilling the criteria for a diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) according to DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994)¹⁰.

Table - VI: Psychological & emotional effects
n=100

Effects	Number
Deterioration of mental health	82
Overwhelming feeling of powerlessness	75
Aggressive thoughts (anger/guilt)	65
Intrusive recollection and flashbacks	55
PTSD (DSM-IV)	47
Avoidance or numbness to responses	38
Suicidal attempts considered	12

A preponderance of 82% victims described deterioration in their physical and/or mental health since the onset of their harassment. Heightened anxiety levels were reported by 83%, which manifested as "jumpiness", "shakes", panic attacks, hypervigilance and exaggerated startle response, (Table-VII). Chronic sleep disturbance was reported by 74%, appetite disturbance by 48% and weight fluctuations 45%, persistent nausea and indigestion 30%, excessive tiredness 47%, headache 55% and 25 subjects reported palpitations.

Table - VII: Physical effects of stalking
n=100

Effects	Number
Chronic sleep disturbance	74
Headache	55
Appetite disturbance	48
Excessive tiredness	47
Weight fluctuation	45
Persistent nausea & indigestion	30
Palpitations	25

DISCUSSION

This study was based on information gathered from victims of stalking. The length and sensitive nature of the questionnaire limited the extent of inquiry into the victim's premorbid background, including vulnerability to trauma.

This study does support growing presentiments that the experience of stalking in our society is not a rare phenomenon. Our finding does not support the notion that stalking experiences are the sole domain of females as 12% of the subjects were males.⁹

Half the victims were confident that their stalking had ceased (as a consequence of action, escape through change of residence or the stalker apparently transferring his interest to another victim). Although a small number reported that there had been a pull in the harassment, usually consequent upon the initiation of proceedings against their pursuer, the victim was not assured that their purgatory was over.

The finding of high prevalence of overt threats against victims and/or third parties was disconcerting. Furthermore 38% of these threats were associated with stalker violence in the form of physical or sexual assault, suggesting that victims would be ill advised to dismiss a stalker's threats to self or loved ones. This contrasts with the findings of Dietz et al.^{8,11} with regard to the impact of threats. In this study violence was more likely if there was a pre-existing relationship between victim and stalker. Male stalkers were no more likely to resort to physical violence than females who stalked.

One of the findings from the study was the extent of upheaval stalkers created for their victims, which frequently extended to the victim's family and friends. Lifestyle changes were universal response to being stalked, with decline in social, occupational and/or academic functioning and sundry other disruptions.¹² Over half of the victims had curtailed, changed or ceased work altogether. Many of those professionally employed considered their professional reputation had suffered as a direct or indirect

result of the stalking. A number of victims felt compelled to shift residence, in some cases overseas.

The psychological suffering in this group was also pronounced^{15,16}. Many felt powerless to change their situation and some had contemplated escape through suicide. A sense of violation and inability to trust were common. Anger and guilt were experienced frequently, as victims found their own actions and those of expected sources of help ineffectual.

Over half of the victims in this study suffered the range of emotional symptoms commonly described in post traumatic samples¹². The victims of stalking is subject to systematic and repeated psychological trauma and often to situation where they experience themselves as subordinated to the coercive control of their stalker, the stalker's power intensifying as fear, declining trust and social withdrawal isolate the victims from their usual supports.

Although the victims reporting the most psychological symptoms and distress were disproportionately female, this may well reflect their greater likelihood of being in prior close relationships with their stalkers, and the fact that violence more often occurred in these settings. None the less, harassment by following or surveillance emerged in this study as a very strong influence on the development of PTSD symptoms. This was consistent with the frequent observation by victims that it was the stalkers constant intrusions and menace that created most fear and distress.^{1,10}

There were perceived shortcomings in the responses both of the social and medical systems. Approaches to law enforcers were too often met with comments such as "you're just over-reacting". Family doctors responding with treatments, such as prescription of sleeping tablets, exacerbated the victim's feelings of guilt and worthlessness. The victims' confusion about the meanings and motives underlying their harassment augmented their fear, particularly when subjected to bizarre forms of harassment. One of the reasons for consulting medical and mental health Professionals was a desire to make sense of strange communications and behavior,

and to seek information on the level of threat posed to them. Third parties can be counter therapeutic to the point of collusion, unwittingly promoting or being a party to the stalking. Treatment available to victims consisted of individual and family support as well as practical advice and telephone assistance.

Upon entering the study participants reported a sense of commonality, validation and diminished isolation. In this setting, some are beginning to make sense of their experience and discover strategies to overcome continuing harassment.

CONCLUSIONS

There has been a tendency to focus on the dangers of stalking behavior and the degree of physical harm inflicted, while the immense psychological and social damage created for the victims, their families, and ultimately society, has not been given proper importance in Pakistan. In this self-report survey of 100 individuals, who have experienced, or currently still experiencing, the unwanted attentions of a stalker, there is ample evidence of the devastating effects on all aspects of the victim's functioning. Many of these victims can attest to the inadequacy of police, legislative and judicial responses to the situations, together with their despair as they were confronted with a largely uninformed, unsympathetic and helpless community. Half of this sample is yet to find an effective solution. There is a pressing need to improve our understanding of the motivations and behaviors of stalkers, together with their repercussions. We must minimize the victim's suffering, which in some cases may be severe and protracted. It is important that public awareness be raised and more accessible, informed, coordinated and caring services are provided for victims.

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