

Coping with Your Stalker

By Sam Vaknin

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Abuse by proxy continues long after the relationship is officially over (at least as far as you are concerned). The majority of abusers get the message, however belatedly and reluctantly. Others – more vindictive and obsessed – continue to haunt their ex-spouses for years to come. These are the stalkers.

Most stalkers are what Zona (1993) and Geberth (1992) call "Simple Obsessional" or, as Mullen and Pathe put it (1999) – "Rejected". They stalk their prey as a way of maintaining the dissolved relationship (at least in their diseased minds). They seek to "punish" their quarry for refusing to collaborate in the charade and for resisting their unwanted and ominous attentions.

Such stalkers come from all walks of life and cut across social, racial, gender, and cultural barriers. They usually suffer from one or more (comorbid) personality disorders. They may have anger management or emotional problems and they usually abuse drugs or alcohol. Stalkers are typically lonely, violent, and intermittently unemployed – but they are rarely full fledged criminals.

Contrary to myths perpetrated by the mass media, studies show that most stalkers are men, have high IQ's, advanced degrees, and are middle aged (Meloy and Gothard, 1995; and Morrison, 2001).

Rejected stalkers are intrusive and inordinately persistent. They recognize no boundaries – personal or legal. They honor to "contracts" and they pursue their target for years. They interpret rejection as a sign of the victim's continued interest and obsession with them. They are, therefore, impossible to get rid of. Many of them are narcissists and, thus, lack empathy, feel omnipotent and immune to the consequences of their actions.

Even so, some stalkers are possessed of an uncanny ability to psychologically penetrate others. Often, this gift is abused and put at the service of their control freakery and sadism. Stalking – and the ability to "mete out justice" makes them feel powerful and vindicated. When arrested, they often act the victim and attribute their actions to self-defence and "righting wrongs".

Stalkers are emotionally labile and present with rigid and infantile (primitive) defense mechanisms: splitting, projection, projective identification, denial, intellectualization, and

narcissism. They devalue and dehumanize their victims and thus "justify" the harassment or diminish it. From here, it is only one step to violent conduct.

This is the topic of our next article.

Additional Reading

Zona M.A., Sharma K.K., and Lane J.: A Comparative Study of Erotomantic and Obsessional Subjects in a Forensic Sample, *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, July 1993, 38(4):894-903.

Vernon Geberth: *Stalkers, Law and Order*, October 1992, 40: 138-140

Mullen P.E., Pathé M., Purcell R., and Stuart G.W.: Study of Stalkers, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, August 1999, 156(8):1244-9

Meloy J.R., Gothard S.: Demographic and Clinical Comparison of Obsessional Followers and Offenders with Mental Disorders, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, February 1995, 152(2):258-63.

Morrison K.A.: Predicting Violent Behavior in Stalkers - A Preliminary Investigation of Canadian Cases in Criminal Harassment, *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, November 2001, 46(6):1403-10.

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Coping with Various Types of Stalkers

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Stalkers are not made of one cloth. Some of them are psychopaths, others are schizoids, narcissists, paranoids, or an admixture of these mental health disorders. Stalkers harass their victims because they are lonely, or because it is fun (these are latent sadists), or because they can't help it (clinging or codependent behaviour), or for a myriad different reasons.

Clearly, coping techniques suited to one type of stalker may backfire or prove to be futile with another. The only denominator common to all bullying stalkers is their pent-up rage. The stalker is angry at his or her targets and hates them. He perceives his victims as unnecessarily and churlishly frustrating. The aim of stalking is to "educate" the victim and to punish her.

Hence the catch-22 of coping with stalkers:

The standard - and good - advice is to avoid all contact with your stalker, to ignore him, even as you take precautions. But being evaded only inflames the stalker's wrath and enhances his frustration. The more he feels sidelined and stonewalled, the more persistent he becomes, the more intrusive and the more aggressive.

It is essential, therefore, to first identify the type of abuser you are faced with.

(1) The Erotomaniac

This kind of stalker believes that he is in love with you and that, regardless of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the feeling is reciprocal (you are in love with him). He interprets everything you do (or refrain from doing) as coded messages confessing your eternal devotion to him and to your "relationship". Erotomaniacs are lonely, socially-inapt people. They may also be people with whom you have been involved romantically (e.g., your former spouse, a former boyfriend, a one night stand) - or otherwise (for instance, colleagues or co-workers).

Best coping strategy

Ignore the erotomaniac. Do not communicate with him or even acknowledge his existence. The erotomaniac clutches at straws and often suffers from ideas of reference. He tends to blow out of proportion every comment or gesture of his "loved one". Avoid contact - do not talk to him, return his gifts unopened, refuse to discuss him with others, delete his correspondence.

(2) The Narcissist

Feels entitled to your time, attention, admiration, and resources. Interprets every rejection as an act of aggression which leads to a narcissistic injury. Reacts with sustained rage and vindictiveness. Can turn violent because he feels omnipotent and immune to the consequences of his actions.

Best coping strategy

Make clear that you want no further contact with him and that this decision is not personal. Be firm. Do not hesitate to inform him that you hold him responsible for his stalking, bullying, and harassment and that you will take all necessary steps to protect yourself. Narcissists are cowards and easily intimidated. Luckily, they never get emotionally attached to their prey and so can move on with ease.

(3) The Paranoid

By far the most dangerous of the lot. Lives in an inaccessible world of his own making. Cannot be reasoned with or cajoled. Thrives on threats, anxiety, and fear. Distorts every communication to feed his persecutory delusions.

From the article "Avoiding Your Paranoid Ex":

"The paranoid's conduct is unpredictable and there is no "typical scenario". But experience shows that you can minimise the danger to yourself and to your household by taking some basic steps.

If at all possible, put as much physical distance as you can between yourself and the stalker. Change address, phone number, email accounts, cell phone number, enlist the kids in a new school, find a new job, get a new credit card, open a new bank account. Do not inform your paranoid ex about your whereabouts and your new life. You may have to make painful sacrifices, such as minimize contact with your family and friends.

Even with all these precautions, your abusive ex is likely to find you, furious that you have fled and evaded him, raging at your newfound existence, suspicious and resentful of your freedom and personal autonomy. Violence is more than likely. Unless deterred, paranoid former spouses tend to be harmful, even lethal.

Be prepared: alert your local law enforcement officers, check out your neighbourhood domestic violence shelter, consider owning a gun for self-defence (or, at the very least, a stun gun or mustard spray). Carry these with you at all times. Keep them close by and accessible even when you are asleep or in the bathroom.

Erotomaniac stalking can last many years. Do not let down your guard even if you haven't heard from him. Stalkers leave traces. They tend, for instance, to "scout" the territory before they make their move. A typical stalker invades his or her victim's privacy a few times long before the crucial and injurious encounter.

Is your computer being tampered with? Is someone downloading your e-mail? Has anyone been to your house while you were away? Any signs of breaking and entering, missing things, atypical disorder (or too much order)? Is your post being delivered

erratically, some of the envelopes opened and then sealed? Mysterious phone calls abruptly disconnected when you pick up? Your stalker must have dropped by and is monitoring you.

Notice any unusual pattern, any strange event, any weird occurrence. Someone is driving by your house morning and evening? A new "gardener" or maintenance man came by in your absence? Someone is making enquiries about you and your family? Maybe it's time to move on.

Teach your children to avoid your paranoid ex and to report to you immediately any contact he has made with them. Abusive bullies often strike where it hurts most - at one's kids. Explain the danger without being unduly alarming. Make a distinction between adults they can trust - and your abusive former spouse, whom they should avoid.

Ignore your gut reactions and impulses. Sometimes, the stress is so onerous and so infuriating that you feel like striking back at the stalker. Don't do it. Don't play his game. He is better at it than you are and is likely to defeat you. Instead, unleash the full force of the law whenever you get the chance to do so: restraining orders, spells in jail, and frequent visits from the police tend to check the abuser's violent and intrusive conduct.

The other behavioural extreme is equally futile and counterproductive. Do not try to buy peace by appeasing your abuser. Submissiveness and attempts to reason with him only whet the stalker's appetite. He regards both as contemptible weaknesses, vulnerabilities he can exploit. You cannot communicate with a paranoid because he is likely to distort everything you say to support his persecutory delusions, sense of entitlement, and grandiose fantasies. You cannot appeal to his emotions - he has none, at least not positive ones.

Remember: your abusive and paranoid former partner blames it all on you. As far as he is concerned, you recklessly and unscrupulously wrecked a wonderful thing you both had going. He is vengeful, seething, and prone to bouts of uncontrolled and extreme aggression. Don't listen to those who tell you to "take it easy". Hundreds of thousands of women paid with their lives for heeding this advice. Your paranoid stalker is inordinately dangerous - and, more likely than not, he is with you for a long time to come."

(4) The Antisocial (Psychopath)

Though ruthless and, typically, violent, the psychopath is a calculating machine, out to maximize his gratification and personal profit. Psychopaths lack empathy and may even be sadistic - but understand well and instantly the language of carrots and sticks.

Best coping strategy

Convince your psychopath that messing with your life or with your nearest is going to cost him dearly. Do not threaten him. Simply, be unequivocal about your desire to be left in peace and your intentions to involve the Law should he stalk, harass, or threaten you. Give him a choice between being left alone and becoming the target of multiple arrests, restraining orders, and worse. Take extreme precautions at all times and meet him only

in public places.

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