

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 affects much more people than ever thought. It doesn't just affect some well known prominent people, as often suggested by media reports. And it is 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 of the victim(s). Stalking is not a single behavior pattern, rather it can be conceptualized as a chain of different behaviors which all have the same aim: to manipulate or to force the other person to do what the offender wants.

The vast majority of stalkers denies that their behavior consists of something which threatens the other person, 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 (Massnahme) stalkers will not undergo an effective treatment.

As many stalkers suffer from attachment problems and resulting social deficits, treatment motivation will increase when they realize, how they can build up an intimate relationship. From this point of view motivation is no longer a precondition for a successful treatment, rather the treatment itself helps creating and improving the motivation. Building up 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. On the victims side this leads to dramatic changes in their personal / professional life, e.g. to move to an other place, to give up a job, to avoid public places, just to mention a few. Often the affected person develops severe psychiatric disorders, such as sleep disorders, stress regulation problems, depression, anxiety disorders, or somatic problems (eating disorders, chronic pain disorders, headaches).

The stalking behavior is initiated and determined by the stalker – the victim's reactions often leads to a increase both in the severity and the intensity of the stalking behavior.

Stalking is not a single "behavior", rather it is a chain a large spectrum of different behavior patterns. Most of the different steps are not per se criminal, e.g. to offer flowers to someone, to call somebody, to write love letters to someone. Only the complexe behavior pattern is what constitutes stalking.

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

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 affected by stalking at least one time in their life (Voss 2004).

How do we understand stalking behavior?

Stalking is not a disease. Stalking is a criminal behavior. 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).

About half of all stalking cases develop out of an intimate relationship. There are some overlaps with domestic violence, therefore. 60% of female victims and 30% of male victims are stalked by an (ex-)intimate partner (von Pechstaed, quoted in Kudlik, 2002,

p.9). The other half of the stalking victims are seen in the workplace. It is overlapping with workplace violence, therefore.

80% of the offender 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 determine. 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 behavior.

What answers do we have against stalking?

There is no single answer. And there is no absolute protection against stalking. Every person can be targeted by a stalker. It is therefore crucial how society protect the citizens against stalking. There is no question, that only by implementing an antistalking law stalking is labeled as a criminal behavior. Such antistalking law leads to appropriate reactions of law enforcement authorities, it helps protecting potential victims, and it provides the basis for an effective management of stalkers.

As Gail Robinson (2004) pointed out, the greatest impact on victim protection has the implementing of specialized police teams: the stalking units. The law is only brought into effect by the law enforcement authorities. An experienced police team focuses much more on the entire stalking picture with the threat on effected persons.

There are many advices for victims:

- Absolutely no contact with the stalker
- Victims should inform relatives and friends
- Installing a second telephone line/mobile phone – the old one is reserved for the stalker
- Documenting in detail all occurrences
- Saving proofs, including photographic documentation of damages
- Depositing 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 contact experienced professionals for advise and help

Both victims and professionals have to be informed about stalking and which preventive strategies are effective. The treatment of stalkers is an important cornerstone and part of a comprehensive approach. Treating stalkers is 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 offense-focussed treatment approaches provides a new

framework for the management of stalkers. Following the implementation of antistalking laws several treatment concepts have been developed. Westrup (1998, 2000) suggested a narrow behavioral approach based on operant conditioning. The idea 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).

A offence-focussed treatment approach is based on the stalking behavior per se – and not on the personality aspects or the motivation for the stalking behavior. Stalking is based on a planned behavior, where the stalking-offender invest 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 (Massnahme-Recht) a treatment will fail, therefore.

An effective treatment approach is based on an assessment, 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 not to participate in an criminal investigation towards oneself. The answer to this dilemma is, that like the treatment cannot be performed without cooperation, neither can be the assessment. As the relapse prevention is in the interest of the offender, the treatment is in his interest as well, which offers a help and support towards the goal: avoiding further difficulties by increasing the ability and skill to socially interact and to build up intimate relationship based on mutual respect. It must be clear for the participating offender, that the result of the assessment may not be in his interest.

Based on the assessment an individual treatment plan is developed. The treatment can be performed either in an out-patient or a clinical setting. Some of the offenders are not treatable, however.

In case of underlying diseases, they have to be treated first, and then the offence-focussed treatment follows. The 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 security, that all the relevant aspects are covered by the treatment.

The 24 moduls of the offence-focussed 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. guilty 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 assertivness training. If necessary the treatment program has to be stretched for covering 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:

- antistalking law
- disciplinary punishment
- stalking units
- curricular integration
- training of professionals

Contrary to the development in English spoken nations, a great part of European nations have failed to implement antistalking laws so far. The existing articles in the criminal code are only sufficient in cases of physical violence, threats, and damages of properties. An antistalking law provides means against the underlying dynamic of stalking behavior. As long as there is no violation of the criminal code, the police will not intervene. They don't have the legal power 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 (Massnahme) is part of the antistalking law. It is important to have the legal means for mandatory treatment, especially in cases where there can't be diagnosed an underlying psychiatric disorder.

The law enforcement authorities need to implement "stalking units". These are specialized police teams focused on stalking. Often this arises concerns about financial and personal resources among political decision makers (Ressourcenproblem).

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

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

Suggested readings

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