



Lurking in the shadows: Stalking is a common occurrence in the U.K. According to 2012 government statistics, almost a fifth of women and 10 percent of men aged 16–59 say they have been affected by stalking, yet conviction rates remain low. | BLOOMBERG

WORLD / CRIME & LEGAL

The stalking cure: rehabilitating an all too common menace

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THE OBSERVER

FEB 23, 2013

LONDON – When forensic psychiatrist Frank Farnham first meets a stalker, he doesn't judge. Some of his clients have done awful things. They have intimidated, pursued and terrified their victims. They have sent harassing emails to ex-partners or followed work colleagues home from the office. They have developed harmful fixations on people who have no intention of returning their attentions. All of them will have run the risk of being sent to jail.

But Farnham sees them, first and foremost, as people in need of his help. "They're in a real pickle," he says. "They've got in a terrible situation and can't get out of it. They can't stop."

Farnham is the co-founder of the United Kingdom's first-ever National Stalking Clinic, based at Chase Farm Hospital in Enfield, north London. The clinic, which opened in late 2011, is situated

in a series of anonymous modern rooms set behind the imposing, late-Victorian facade of the hospital itself. The uninspiring setting belies the important work that goes on behind the air-locked security doors.

According to 2012 government statistics, almost a fifth of women in the U.K. and 10 percent of men aged 16-59 say they have been affected by stalking, yet conviction rates remain low: only 20 stalkers a year are jailed for more than 12 months, while others get shortened or community sentences. Farnham and his colleagues are offering an alternative to ineffective prison terms.

So far, 80 stalkers have been referred to the clinic by the criminal justice system, 25 have been deemed suitable for treatment and half a dozen have been awarded funding to see them through the eight- to nine-month process to eventual recovery.

The treatment takes the form of joint psychiatric and psychological assessment which, says Farnham, “looks at the cycles and patterns of behavior. What gets you into this situation where you’re offending? Let’s unpack that. Usually the perpetrator turns up and he’s very disparaging about the victim. It’s all about how the perpetrator sees things. ... So it’s, ‘OK, how can we stop this stalker going back into prison?’ Over time, they’ll start looking at the victim and the impact it’s having on them.”

The types of stalkers Farnham sees are 80 percent male and can be divided into five broad categories: the rejected stalker, who has had a relationship with the victim and often seeks revenge; the intimate stalker who often becomes deluded that the object of their attentions is a willing romantic partner; the incompetent stalker who usually has underlying learning disabilities or mental-health issues; the resentful stalker who does it to frighten and distress; and finally, the predatory stalker who is preparing a sexual attack.

Farnham, who works mental health services in north London, deals mostly with the first category: ex-partners or rejected suitors who are furious about the break-up of their relationship. “They’ll come to me and say, ‘How dare she break up with me? I want to get back together with her so then I can be the one who leaves.’ They’re narcissistic, grandiose and often underpinning that is low self-esteem. A lot of perpetrators are victims themselves,” says Farnham. “But I’m absolutely not underplaying the impact on the victims. It has a terrible effect.”

At an outside cafe table in the seaside town of Brighton, Sam Taylor likens the effect to being hunted. “The horrific thing is the level of fear you experience,” she says. It is sunny and the clear blue skies provide an oddly disjointed backdrop to the story she recounts. It is the story of how, for five years, she has been stalked by her former partner — the father of her children.

Since the breakdown of their relationship in 2008, Sam says her ex-partner has broken into her house, trailed her, sent abusive texts and letters to her friends and family. On 94 separate occasions he has breached a string of restraining orders. When charged, the sentencing has been

lenient — most often 32 weeks, reduced to 16 for “good behavior.” He is currently living a few miles away from her.

Sam, 44 and a university administrator, has become accustomed to existing in a state of constant tension. From her handbag, she takes out a slim, black mobile phone and explains that this operates as a panic button so that she can alert the police if she is in danger. She tends not to travel too far from her central Brighton home. When I ask if she’s been on holiday over the past five years, she laughs and shakes her head. “You can’t not be hysterical,” she explains, the expression in her eyes obscured by dark glasses. “When you’re being hunted down, the only reaction is hysteria.”

Most stalking victims are, like Sam, targeted by a partner or ex-partner. A 2004 report, conducted by two criminal psychologists in the U.K., America and Australia, found that nearly half of all offenders turned violent, while 40 percent of victims were forced to move home or job. Typically, stalking situations last a year or two, although a substantial number carry on for up to five years and some even for decades.

With broadened access to the Internet, instances of cyber-stalking (which can include email hacking, threatening messages left on social networking sites and identity theft) have also increased dramatically — the 2010 British Crime Survey estimates that around 2.1 million people experience online stalking each year.

A number of celebrities, too, have suffered. In 2011, a stalker broke into Madonna’s London home because he believed he was in a relationship with the singer and had shared “special messages” with her. And although the victims of stalking are overwhelmingly female, the issue also affects men. In May 2011 the footballer Rio Ferdinand’s stalker, Susanne Ibru, was jailed for 10 weeks and made the subject of a restraining order after a judge described her behavior as “predatory and manipulative.”

Until relatively recently, stalking was not a specific criminal offense. Although there are approximately 120,000 cases each year, only 53,000 incidents are recorded as crimes by police and only one in 50 cases leads to an offender being jailed.

But times are changing. At Farnham’s clinic, stalking is for the first time being treated as a mental-health issue — something he believes will have a positive impact on re-offending rates. Stalkers can be referred to the clinic by the courts, police, probation service or NHS. Where appropriate, they will recommend community sentences with compulsory rehabilitation programmes lasting for the best part of a year at a cost of £ 7,000 to £ 10,000 — compared to the £ 45,000 price tag of keeping someone in jail for a year.

“If you want to send them to prison, then fine, but it needs to be a long enough sentence for them to get proper treatment,” Farnham says. “If they get a short sentence of, say, six months, they’re

out after three and they're angry they've been sent to prison, they've been surrounded by a criminal community supportive of their behavior and when they get out, they'll start stalking again."

Last November, the U.K. government passed new legislation to ensure that victims' claims are taken seriously. Stalkers will now be prosecuted in the crown court if it can be shown that their victims experience "a fear of violence." And, for the first time, police will be trained in how to handle those who have experienced stalking.

For Sam, the move is long overdue. Dealing with the authorities and the courts was, by her own admission, an exhausting, frightening and humiliating experience. When she first voiced her concerns to the police, she remembers being told: "This is a waste of police time. You'll be back with him within three days."

"You're abused and isolated by a man and then that happens 10-fold by the system," she says.

It is a familiar tale. Many of the victims I speak to have had negative experiences with police who, until now, have undergone no formal training to spot the warning signs or to handle the psychological fallout.

Claire Waxman, 37, a complementary therapist who was stalked by Elliot Fogel, a Sky Sports television producer she first met at school, says that when she reported it, she was met with "a very flippant reaction. The policeman laughed it off and said something like, 'Aren't you lucky, having an admirer?'"

Fogel subjected his former schoolmate to a nine-year campaign of harassment during which he Googled her name 40,000 times in a year, posed as a prospective parent at her child's nursery, broke into her car and made hundreds of late-night phone calls to her. He was finally sentenced to two years in prison in January.

The knock-on effect of Fogel's actions was devastating. Claire lost weight, had bouts of sleeplessness and was forced to move home five times. She also suffered a miscarriage. She remains "hyper-vigilant" about the safety of her two children, aged six and three, and her marriage has been "under an incredible amount of stress and strain."

Claire says one of the difficulties in getting the relevant authorities to take stalking seriously is that the impact is often psychological and hard to prove. "As stalking victims, we've not been beaten up, you can't see the physical injury," she explains. "The problem is that the actions in isolation can look pretty meaningless but when you live on a day-to-day basis with something that is invading your family and work life, you feel infected by this person.

"There's no place you can turn where they're not watching. You know you're being watched and

you have that feeling, that animal instinct, all the time ... it's not flattering in any way whatsoever."

And there is, of course, a very real danger that stalking can escalate into something much worse. Last June, Al Amin Dhalla, 42, a former auditor from London, was jailed for a minimum of six years for the "deliberate and chilling" stalking of his former girlfriend, Dr. Alison Hewitt. Dhalla launched a four-month campaign to trace his ex's movements. At the height of the harassment, police airlifted Dr. Hewitt's parents from their holiday home on Lundy Island off the Devon coast amid fears for their safety.

Harry Fletcher, the assistant general secretary of the British probation union Napo and an adviser on the Parliamentary Inquiry into stalking law reform, says that many victims don't report stalking because of fear: "Fear of the escalation of violence, the belief that maybe they've contributed to that behaviour, the belief that you might lose your job and that the process of reporting the abuse will be humiliating or not taken seriously," he says.

Indeed, research compiled by Dr. Lorraine Sheridan at Heriot-Watt University three years ago found that, on average, three-quarters of stalking victims aged 19-25 wait for at least 120 incidents before contacting the police.

"By that time," says Fletcher. "Some of the people who might have reported it are dead."

These are not empty words. A 1999 study conducted by an American academic found that 76 percent of women murdered by their ex-partners had been stalked in the lead-up to the killing. Stalking has been described, with good reason, as "murder in slow-motion."

The facts of Sam Taylor's case make for harrowing reading. In 2008, her long-term partner and the father of her children (who were then 10 months and two years old) revealed that he had once been convicted of tying up and raping a 14-year-old girl. Her partner had served a five-year prison sentence for the crime before they met. Unbeknown to Sam, he had been on the sex offenders' register for almost a decade. When the police discovered he had two children, they told him they would be forced to inform his partner unless he did so himself.

Sam was left traumatized by the confession. She moved out, taking the children to her parents, who lived nearby.

Then the stalking started.

"He phoned me 17 times a day, he'd leave toys for the children in the back of my car," Sam says now. "Everywhere I went, he was there. I just couldn't work out, most of the time, how he knew where I was."

He was arrested and spent two weeks in custody, from where he sent around 40 letters to Sam,

her parents and her neighbors. When he was released on a restraining order, he broke it — sending Sam a text with a picture of a noose and the message: “It’ll all be over soon my flower.”

Again, he was arrested, sentenced to 32 weeks and released after 16. He was permitted to live “five minutes’ walk” from Sam’s house. But by this stage, a terrified Sam and her children were sheltering in a women’s refuge.

“You think: ‘This can’t be the case,’ ” she says now. “But it is the case. It’s not until you find yourself in a situation like this that you understand. It’s just outrageous.”

The stalking continued: phone calls out of the blue, sudden appearances while Sam was shopping or out for a pub lunch with her family, threatening texts sent to friends and relatives. He broke into her house and switched off the electricity at the mains. He contacted her parents and sent a sexually explicit email to her friend’s teenage daughter.

And all the time, Sam says, there was a presumption that she was the one at fault. “His defense will always be: I’m in the same place as him and I’ve gone there to have him arrested,” she explains. “I was constantly being advised to move away from the area. But I live here, I work here, my friends and family are here, my children go to school here. If I moved, I would be completely isolated and the police wouldn’t be up to date with all the details of my case.

“I’ve got a massive feeling of grief and devastation that my children are never going to know their father because it’s not safe for them.”

How, I wonder, does she find the strength to talk so openly about her case when it has cost her so much? “Someone once told me the safest thing to do was tell everyone,” she says. “I have to speak out. That’s what keeps me sane. A lot of people feel shame or they feel embarrassed. I don’t feel ashamed. I feel outraged.”

What causes someone to become a stalker? As Farnham outlines, in a large number of cases there is a perception of rejection that results in a dangerous fixation on the victim. But broader social forces are also at play: the fact that stalking appears to be on the rise has been blamed on everything from our obsession with celebrity to social isolation and a growing culture of blame.

“Normally a stalker has had an intimate relationship with the victim in which there tends to be abuse and control issues,” says Laura Richards, a criminal behavioral analyst and co-founder of the charity Protection Against Stalking. “When the woman leaves, the stalker cannot take the rejection and then they fixate.

“I call it the ‘angel/demon’ syndrome. When the stalker is arrested, he will often be very plausible in interview. He’ll say: ‘I love her, she’s the center of my life, I didn’t realize I was upsetting her.’ Then, when she doesn’t behave the way he wants, it will be: ‘She’s a bitch, she’s not going to

destroy my life.' That leads to violence and murder.”

Those victims who do survive are frequently diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. “People think stalking’s a celebrity issue so they don’t take it seriously because each action can look quite innocuous and unremarkable in isolation,” says Richards. “But it’s the pattern, the totality of it that makes it creepy and scary for the victim.

“Stalking of celebrities or royalty is more of a mental-health issue and often they don’t have knowledge or access to these people. Domestic stalking can’t just be dismissed. It’s psychologically damaging and often there is no violence until there’s a homicide. A lot of professionals don’t understand what they’re seeing until it’s too late.”

Back in the Brighton cafe, Sam Taylor has finished her coffee. “It’s not until you actually find yourself in a situation like this that you suddenly think: ‘Oh my God,’ ” she says, taking off her sunglasses to reveal tired eyes. Her stalker is still active. The other week, he sent a Facebook friend request to her work colleague. “I don’t really venture out of the area I live in any more,” she says finally, “because I’m really not safe.”

We get the bill. While I am settling up, I notice Sam’s eyes darting across the road to where her car is parked. There is always the chance that the familiar, sinister figure will appear on the far side of the street, always the fear that she is being watched and held in his imaginary crosshairs. The hunter and the hunted. And for Sam, a life lived looking over her shoulder.

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