

# Sticky Attachments

In the fall of 1968, a young man named Prosenjitt Poddar fell head over heels for an attractive young college co-ed named Tatiana. They met at a folk dancing class and saw each other weekly. On New Year's Eve, he kissed this young woman and he interpreted the kiss to be a recognition and acknowledgment of the existence of a serious relationship. This view was not shared by the young co-ed and she indicated that she was not interested in being romantically involved with him. He pursued her romantically for a period of time and, to his disbelief, Tatiana did not share his similar feelings. Rebuffed and angry, he continued his love campaign for her. Finally, in October 1969, he made his way to her residence armed with a pellet gun and knife and took Tatiana Tarasoff's life. This was the origins of the Tarasoff law and a profound example of stalking.

Stalking is not a new phenomenon. It is antiquated and romanticized. Shakespeare wrote about spurned love, and many movies depict the angry and scorned revengeful behaviors aimed at winning their target's affection or attention such as *Play Misty for Me*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Fear*. Or songs such as the Police's *Every Breath You Take* illustrate stalking behaviors. Stalking is an old behavior, however, a relatively new law.

In 1990, the first anti-stalking legislation was developed. This was mostly in response to the stalking and eventuated murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer. Her murderer, Robert John Bardo, had developed an obsessional and delusional fantasy about him and Rebecca. Highly obsessed with her, he sent her many mailings and hired a private detective to locate her residence. On July 18, 1989, with a handgun concealed in a brown paper bag, Mr. Bardo knocked on her door. She opened the door and he pointed the gun at her chest and fired. He uttered the phrase, "This is for you." Prior to this unfortunate event, there were no stalking laws in the United States. The Schaeffer murder and the subsequent public outcry prompted California to enact the first anti-stalking legislation in 1990 (Saunders, 1998).

Following the implementation of California's law in 1990, all 50 states and many Western countries have also developed anti-stalking legislation (Boychuk, 1994; Sheridan, Blauuw, & Davies, 2003; Sheridan &



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Davies, 2001a). California's anti-stalking law is defined as:

Any person who willfully, maliciously, and repeatedly follows or harasses another person and who makes a credible threat with the intent to place that person in reasonable fear for his or her safety, or the safety of his or her immediate family, is guilty of the crime of stalking. (California Penal Code §646.9)

## Sticky Attachments

I developed the term "sticky attachments" as a means to conceptualize stalking behaviors. Stalkers attach to others whom they have developed an interest or liking. There is usually an automatic assumption conclud-

ed by the stalker that the victim shares the same feelings and is interested in him. The attachment occurs quickly and un-sticking the attachment tends to be incredibly difficult.

When the stalker's affection or interests are met with rejection and refusal by the victim, shame and humiliation develops. Such feelings are soon accompanied by anger thus leading stalkers to behave in ways to preserve their fantasy attachment to the victim. These might include making threats, harassing the victim, and essentially employing desperate measures to gain their attention, affection, and acceptance. For example, "I will kill myself if you don't call me back;" "You better be at home when I come by or I will come by your work and make a big scene;" "Why don't you realize what you are doing? We are meant to be together. I will make you see how right I am for you."

Other stalking behaviors aimed at maintaining the sticky attachment involve sending unwanted gifts, showing up coincidentally where the victim shops, following the victim, damaging the victim's property, and making persistent phone calls with or without leaving a message. In one stalking case, for example, in the discovery, the victim's phone records demonstrated that the stalking perpetrator had telephoned her 236 times in one sixty-minute period, an estimated four calls per minute.

Often, victims of stalking will pose questions such as, "Why doesn't he get it? I have told him to stop calling, e-mailing, and coming by, but he does not listen." It is the interpretation that stalkers make on what has been said to them. What they hear has to be interpreted into what will be congruent with how they feel about the victim and themselves. "I don't want to see you anymore, nor do I want you to call me or any of my friends asking about me." In this example, the stalker might interpret this straightforward statement as, "She doesn't mean that. I'll give her a day or two to cool off and then I will call her or go see her. Things will be different."

Victims of stalking, for example, can be former intimates, strangers, acquaintances, and/or famous persons. I evaluated a stalker who was harassing a known singing sensation and thought that the victim was somehow involved in sending unwanted and torturous stinging sensations throughout his body. He thought that his stalking behaviors might cause her to cease her involvement in his physical agony and frighten her into actually helping him. Many times, stalking victims placate the

stalker's anger or threats as a means to "reach them" or, if they acquiesce, the stalking behaviors will eventually stop. This is not commonly the case. The more contact or the greater the victim compliance, the stickier the attachment becomes.

### Characteristics of the Sticky Stalker

Studies have indicated that the majority of stalkers are male. The National Violence Against Women study found that 78% of stalking perpetrators were male (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). In the stalking treatment program offered at my office, the statistics are similar to what the literature has found in that about 85% are male with about a 12-15% prevalence of female stalkers.

Stalking perpetrators are also typically Caucasian and in their mid-thirties (Boon & Sheridan, 2001). Most of them are underemployed or unemployed. The employment finding appears to be related to the simply fact that the stalker cannot be tied down with work-related responsibilities that will interfere with their campaign of harassment or pursuit of their victims. A large percentage of stalking perpetrators have drug and alcohol problems that tend to exacerbate their already poor and faulty judgment. Research by Meloy and Gothard (1995), for example, indicated that 70% of their sample of stalking perpetrators had substance abuse or dependence disorders. Additionally, in an unpublished study conducted by the San Diego County Probation Department (2001), stalking defendants had higher probation revocation rates when compared to other probationers. Also, this research demonstrated that custody was not a strong deterrent for continued stalking behaviors.

### Un-sticking the Stalker

Once attached, the stalker can be relentless in his pursuit of his victim. Attempting to communicate or reason with the stalker only further secures the attachment. Victims are advised to cease and desist any further communication or contact. This would include not answering phone calls or responding to e-mails from the stalker, changing phone numbers, altering activities such as shopping



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at a different grocery stores, attempting to avoid any potential physical contact, and alerting friends, family, and co-workers of the stalker's pursuit. Other options include contacting law enforcement, and obtaining a restraining order. Victims of stalking commonly have to make enormous life changes to remove the stalker from their lives.

Psychotherapy is often helpful for victims of stalking. Such interventions help victims of stalking cope with the victimization, educate them about stalking, and assist them with the guilt, shame, anxiety, and depression that accompany such traumatic experiences. For stalking perpetrators, once adjudicated and if sentenced to a grant of probation, the involvement in a stalking treatment program is essential.

The objectives of the Stalking Treatment Options Program (STOP) offered at my office are: (1) Assess, diagnose, and identify factors contributing to clients' stalking behaviors and obsessive thought patterns. (2) Modify clients' current faulty perceptions of relationships and intimacy, reduce boundary violations, and develop appropriate social skills. (3) Increase clients' anger management skills, develop a tolerance for disappointments and frustrations, and communicate thoughts and feelings in a non-threatening and non-aggressive manner. (4) Implement cognitive behavioral modification treatment and behavioral containment strategies. (5) Maintenance of newly

acquired skills to assist in avoiding relapse and recidivism.

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