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INSIDE THE MIND OF A STALKER

Eugene Costello talks to leading psychiatrist Dr Frank Farnham, who works with some of Britain's most deluded criminals

In a grim part of Enfield, north London—all rundown brick housing and weed-choked driveways—lies Chase Farm Hospital, home of the National Stalking Clinic (NSC). It's a suitable setting for treating those whose weird, obsessive behaviour causes misery and fear to thousands of people every year. ▶

◀ A guard buzzes me into the secure unit and a tall, broad-shouldered man greets me in the anteroom. “Hi, I’m Frank,” says the 48-year-old consultant forensic psychiatrist, in soft tones that belie the depressing nature of what we’re about to talk about. He leads me through some more security doors to a bare, functional interview room.

Dr Farnham starts his rough guide to stalking with a definition. Though legal descriptions may vary from country to country, for the clinic’s purposes stalking is basically persistent and unwanted attention that causes fear in the victim. The presence of fear is important, as it elevates behaviour from the unremarkable hurt feelings of, say, a former friend to harassment.

But to understand what motivates stalkers and perhaps treat them, says Farnham, you need to break them down into five types.

With the exception of a few doctor referrals, stalkers only end up at the NSC as a result of a court order that demands they undergo treatment instead of, or to reduce, a prison sentence or community service. But, troublingly, estimates suggest between eight and 20 per cent of adult British women are stalked at some point, and around 45 per cent of the dozens of offenders Farnham sees each year are rejected lovers.

“They tend to be angry, jealous men [90 per cent are male] with a strong sense of entitlement, often grandiose, yet allied to low self-esteem. They cannot cope with or tolerate the end of a relationship, so they harass their ex-partner instead. For that to become stalking might mean

a campaign lasting a year, though it can go on for five, ten or even 20 years.”

One of Dr Farnham’s patients, Paul*, was fairly typical of this type of stalker. The 40-year-old was a successful but narcissistic builder. “While his mother put food on the table and gave him clean clothes, she was emotionally unavailable, and that made him rather clingy and needy. He had a record of relationships ending acrimoniously and finished up in front of me after breaking up with a long-term partner with whom he had two kids. He’d had affairs left, right and centre, but saw nothing wrong with it. Yet when the relationship began to sour, he became certain she was seeing someone else and bought surveillance equipment to track her movements—he bugged the car and house. When the relationship ended, he started following her.”

Eventually, a garage mechanic found the car bug and Paul was cautioned, but he carried on following his ex for four years, ignoring community-service and restraining orders, and finally being sent to the NSC.

“The crazy thing was that he was in a new relationship, but he couldn’t stop himself stalking,” says Farnham. “He told me: ‘I’ll send her five texts a day during the week, three stroppy voicemails on Friday and Saturday night when I’ve had a drink, and I sit outside her house on a Sunday. It’s my routine; my life.’”

While a few people in the “rejected” category are too violent or opposed to treatment to be helped by the NSC, most accept they have a problem and some 70 per cent respond well to psychological and therapeutic techniques.

“Even if they refuse to accept they’ve

done anything wrong, we say, ‘Well, I understand, but the court doesn’t see it that way. Life’s a bitch, but where do we go from here?’ And they get that, and we start work.”

A few weeks of talking through their anger and self-centred perceptions allows NSC staff to start to ask gently what effect they think their behaviour might be having on their victim. From there, cognitive-behavioural therapy—usually over six months or more—can then help the stalker improve their problem-solving techniques and other life skills.

The second group of stalkers, says Farnham, are dubbed “resentful”.

“They’re often pursuing a quest for justice. They have a grievance—the gas company did them out of £20 in 1984, say—and they’ve been pursuing it ever since. They might latch onto a community figure, such as their MP [Stephen Timms,

job, your mates and your partner has left you, so the stalking effectively becomes your job. I’ve seen people in this group who, believe it or not, have forgotten what the original grievance was.”

Some offenders will be mentally ill—perhaps with delusional illnesses—so treatment has to be decided case by case. “But almost all of them will require both psychiatric and psychological treatment; the question will be the ratio.”

The third and most interesting group

from a psychiatric perspective, says Farnham, are “intimacy seekers”, who believe they’re in a love affair. This includes people with forms of erotomania, such as De Clérambault’s Syndrome, as displayed by Rhys Ifans’s character in the film of Ian McEwan’s novel *Enduring Love*.

“For some, the erotomania is a form of schizophrenia. Others have what I call ‘pathological infatuation’. They are still

“I’ve seen people who have forgotten what the original grievance was”

the Labour MP for East Ham, for example, who was stabbed twice in the stomach by Roshonara Choudhry in 2010 over his perceived support for the Iraq War], a doctor, a councillor and so forth.”

The offender’s problem is often compounded because their odd behaviour alienates the people who otherwise might keep them in check. “You’ve lost your

deluded but much better at hiding it, though it manifests itself suddenly.

“I have a patient who comes from another culture, who had little experience of women until he came to the UK and got a job that brought him into proximity with them. He fixated on a colleague and decided that the feeling was mutual, that she was sending him proof of her love ▶

◀ by giving him eye contact exactly when he was willing her to, and by sending signals, such as always sitting on the third chair to his left. So he followed her on the bus, then home. And when she said, 'Stop it or I'll call the police,' this was part of the ritual. In his mind, she was testing the strength of his love.

"I asked him, 'What are you doing? You've lost your job, you're in trouble with the police, you're terrorising this poor woman and your victim's family have threatened to kill you.'

"He said, in all seriousness, 'You know, the path of true love never runs smoothly, doctor. She's the right one, and if I give up so easily I'll never forgive myself, and nor will she.' "

Patients like these need psychiatric treatment, but after attending the NSC for a while, "they're more open to us saying, 'You need to develop better strategies in life. Look where this has got you.' So we can achieve fairly good results.

"That said, this group can become aggressive when their delusion is shattered—say, when the recipient of the attention suddenly changes attitude and makes it clear that the attention is unwanted. The stalker may feel they were led on. So we'd always advise victims to be clear from the word go. If you only answer the phone when you can see it's the stalker after they ring 20 times, all he'll take from that is he must ring 19 times before you'll talk to them. So don't answer at all."

Watching them, watching you: how to outsmart stalkers

- Vary the route you walk to work and the places you visit during your daily routine.
- Always walk in the direction of oncoming traffic to avoid kerb crawlers.
- When you're out, have a back-up plan of places you could easily reach, such as a friend's house or busy building, if something were to happen.
- Always conduct first dates or business meetings in public places.
- Avoid working alone, even in an office, where possible. Give a photo of your stalker to security staff and your manager.
- Keep a log of any harassment or odd behaviour, including the time, date and how it made you feel. Keep any emails, letters or presents you've been sent. Ask the police if they can loan you a CCTV system for your home.
- Go to the police as soon as someone's sustained behaviour makes you feel scared or intimidated.

For more tips, see stalkinghelpline.org.

Similar to the intimacy seekers are the quaintly named "incompetent suitors". These are people who want to get a boyfriend or girlfriend but are hopeless at it, perhaps because they have learning difficulties or very poor social skills.

"They tend to be gauche and forceful, so may turn up at the victim's house and bang on the door, saying, 'Why won't you talk to me? I really love you!' And the dad will warn them off and they'll keep coming back, and they'll end up here."

“Funnily enough, this group is perhaps the easiest to deal with because they tend to respond to a behavioural approach”—Farnham holds up his hand prohibitively—“where you say, ‘That’s not acceptable!’ They’re not bad people, just a bit child-like, so we drill social skills into them.”

The last group, however, are altogether more sinister individuals—again, usually men—who stalk women for sexual and even homicidal reasons.

“‘Predatory stalkers’ are the sort of people the police might stop because their car back light is out and then officers will find rape paraphernalia in the boot—ropes, night goggles and so forth,” says Farnham.

Perhaps luckily for Farnham, this sort of behaviour doesn’t fall within the NSC’s remit. Their patients are typically sentenced to a year or less in prison. “Once the predatory stalkers are caught, they’ve

either carried out, or are on the verge of carrying out, a horrific crime for which only [long-term] jail is an option.”

Still, there are risks in Farnham’s work. “An NHS psychiatrist called Jan Falkowski was stalked by a patient around ten years ago. She went through his bins, found a used condom, emptied it into her knickers, then went to the police and said he’d raped her. They DNA-tested it and he was arrested and charged. Luckily, they then found his girlfriend’s DNA in the sample too, so the stalker was imprisoned for perverting the course of justice.

“But,” concludes Farnham, “that’s fairly atypical.”

He walks me back to the high-security reception, leaving me to reflect on what I’ve learned. And wondering how he manages to remain a man of great warmth and humanity despite having to deal with some of the most unpalatable aspects of human behaviour. ■

Missing the Point



For all that science shapes society, there are areas of research that—to us amateurs, at least—seem a little fruitless.

In 2003, for instance, Plymouth University used **a grant of £2,000** from

the Arts Council to uncover the fact that monkeys can’t type. Locked in a room with a computer, the six primates under observation got

“bored” and “s*** on the keyboard”, thus ending the study.

A similar madness must have struck the researchers at Oxford University who **spent £300,000** installing a shower in a pond in

2009. After observing ducks standing under the shower and drinking from it, they concluded that... ducks like water. Really.

Taking the biscuit, though, are the winners in the physiology category of the **2011 Ig Nobel Prize** (awarded for trivial achievements in science). The title of their paper? “No Evidence of Contagious Yawning in the Red-Footed Tortoise.”