Stalking and Clinical Counsellors: An Introduction

By Jennifer Storey MA and Barry Williscroft MA, RCC

Stalking victimization is reported by 4 percent of Canadian women, and 2 percent of men (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2005). However, recent studies have shown that stalking is more prevalent among individuals who hold certain professions. Mental health professionals in particular are much more likely to become the targets of stalking. For instance, 33 percent of counsellors report being the target of stalking behaviour and 64 percent report other forms of harassment (Romans, Hays, & White, 1996).

This targeted harassment is a concern for several reasons. Stalking behaviour is a persistent and threatening form of violence that can severely affect the mental health of victims, and those close to them. Moreover, it is estimated that 25- to 35 percent of stalking cases involve violence (McFarlane et al., 1999).

The heightened targeting of mental health professionals is likely due to the increased contact that these professionals have with clients who are capable of problematic behaviour. Thus, the nature of the profession necessarily places counsellors at higher risk for stalking victimization. Despite the increased risk, education, training and awareness of stalking among mental health professionals are low, which makes professionals more vulnerable to physical and psychological harm.

Mental health professionals, who are untrained in identifying and managing stalking behaviour, are likely to make the same errors as any other victim. Missteps can inadvertently perpetuate the stalking behaviour and in some cases cause it to escalate. Moreover, victims tend not to seek advice or assistance, and are sometimes unaware that it is available to them (Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2001). (The word “victim” in this context is used only in the sense it is used in the criminal justice system to describe a person who is the target of a criminal offense).

Competent advice and assistance can help to stop stalking behaviour, improve safety, limit harm, and accelerate recovery. However, to date few studies have been conducted on the topic of stalking directed at mental health professionals. Furthermore, no studies have examined how these professionals effectively manage and stop the stalking behaviour.

What to do if you are being stalked, or need to consult about threatening behaviour?

Contact the BCACC Head Office at 1 800 909 6303. Contact extension 5.
Volunteer colleagues will consult you to assist you in managing the situation. This service is confidential, free to BCACC members, and meets the highest standards.

What to Do About It?

The BCACC Board has launched an initiative to address these concerns. The decision to address this issue came about as a result of recent experience assisting members who were being actively stalked.

The first part of the initiative is to support and assist members who are experiencing stalking or other threatening behaviour. Members may consult competent and experienced colleagues who will provide confidential assistance in managing the situation.

The second part of this initiative is to support a study by Jennifer Storey, a PHD student in the Psychology Department at Simon Fraser University (SFU). The study will be launched in the summer of 2009. The research will be assisted and overseen on behalf of the BCACC by Barry Williscroft, and involves no cost to the Association.

The study will focus primarily on the targeting of counsellors by their clients as well as counsellors' thoughts, experiences, and ideas about how to manage and prevent such behaviour. As a result, the study is open to all members of the BCACC. We are interested in the experiences and ideas of individuals who have and have not been the target of stalking behaviour.

The study consists of a voluntary and confidential online survey. The survey will be hosted on a secure server owned by SFU. Survey questions cover items of known relevance to stalking behaviour, threat assessment and management, and other issues related to training. The survey will be available exclusively to BCACC members, as a distinct large sample of mental health professionals of known educational and practice standards

How to participate:

All members will receive a broadcast email from the BCACC with information on how to participate. Participation is voluntary, confidential, and meets the ethical standards of the SFU Research Ethics Board. The information gathered will be used to develop a training program for BCACC members, to substantially improve knowledge of safety and security issues. This study will be the first Canadian study on this topic and has the potential to be the largest study ever conducted on stalking among mental health professionals. Your information and experiences are important. Telling your story and providing your opinions on these issues will make an important contribution.

There will be more information in future Insights articles as the research unfolds, and as a training program develops.

Questions are most welcome, and should be directed to Barry Williscroft at **hoffice@bc-counsellors.org**

References and Suggested reading

▪ Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. (2005). *Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile.* Ottawa, ON: Author.
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▪Romans, J. S. C., Hays, J. R., & White, T. K. (1996). Stalking and related behaviours experienced by counseling center staff members from current or former clients. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 27,* 595-599.

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Both are members of the Canadian Association of Threat Assessment Professionals.