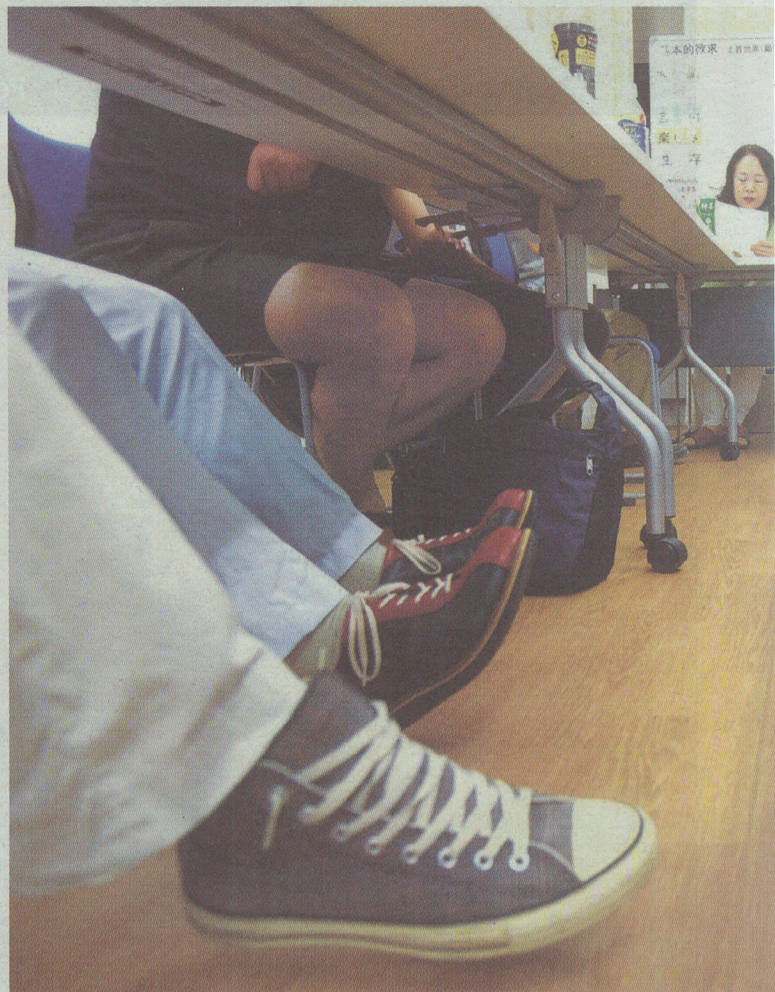


TimeOut | Waking up to the menace of stalking



Tomoko Otake
STAFF WRITER

When Kobayashi returned home from work one day in August last year to find that his wife and two daughters had packed their bags and disappeared. Kobayashi, who would only agree to speak to The Japan Times on condition of anonymity, immediately reported their disappearance to the police but was informed that his wife had filed for protection, citing domestic violence.

Moderately tanned and stylishly dressed in a salmon pink V-neck shirt, the softly spoken Kobayashi does not immediately conjure up the typical image of a stalker or abuser.

A year earlier, he refused to believe that he was an abusive husband and thought that his wife was making false allegations, possibly to mask an extra-marital affair.

However, he now realizes that was exactly how he behaved a year ago, when the Saitama resident in his early 50s lost contact with his family. His mood shifted from denial to outright rage upon receiving a letter from his wife's lawyer, stating that she had filed for a divorce and asking him to keep his distance from both her and her relatives. The letter was followed by a court order summoning him for divorce proceedings.

"I felt like committing murder," Kobayashi says. "I wanted to kill my wife and daughters, then myself. I wanted to erase everything from my life."

After receiving the court order, Kobayashi approached several detective agencies to find out if they could track down his family. (They had moved to a shelter.) When that failed — private investigators are, by law, banned from initiating searches for domestic abuse victims — he consulted an acquaintance with connections to organized crime.

"I was told gangsters can find them easily at a cost of ¥1 million per head," he recalls.

Kobayashi even toyed with the idea of secretly attaching GPS tracking devices to the cars of his wife's relatives, he says.

Fortunately, help arrived before he had a chance to act on these ideas. In October, while he was still actively plotting revenge, Kobayashi knocked on the door of Yokohama-based nonprofit organization STEP, which runs an education and rehabilitation program for alleged and convicted stalkers and abusers. After his first consultation with STEP Director Kayomi Kurihara, his perspective com-

pletely changed.

"I realized I had abused my wife ever since marrying in 2006," Kobayashi says, noting that it was work-related stress that had made him violent toward his family. "I had abused my wife psychologically, intimidating her with words and throwing things around the house. As I talked to Ms. Kurihara, I started to remember the things that I had done."

Kobayashi, who has since completed divorce proceedings, says he would have turned into a stalker — perhaps even a murderer — had he not visited STEP.

Increased awareness

As the number of reported stalking cases keeps rising, a number of experts are calling for the public and private sectors to be more proactive in stopping stalkers before their actions escalate to something more sinister.

At present, however, only a handful of domestic facilities such as STEP offer counseling and education to such people.

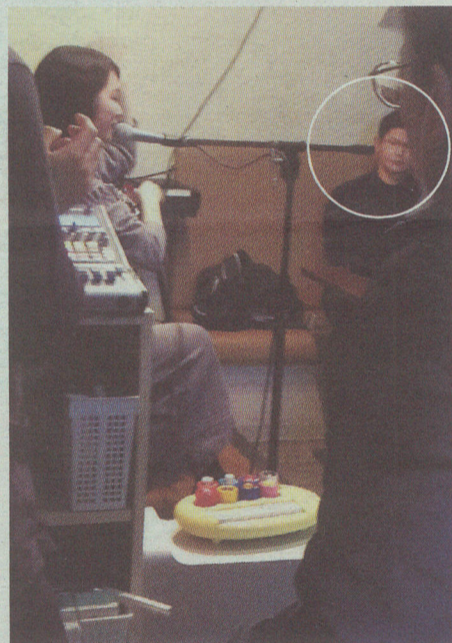
Although stalking has been a problem for a long time, it only began to be officially recognized as a crime fairly recently.

An anti-stalking law was introduced in 2000 after a female college student in Okegawa, Saitama Prefecture, was murdered by a stalker the year before. In a case that sent shock waves throughout the nation, the 21-year-old student was stabbed to death in front of JR Okegawa Station by a former boyfriend who ran a sex shop. He had used a false name and lied to her about his job, and harassed her when their relationship ended.

The case caused a public furor after it emerged that police had failed to act on repeated pleas for help by the student and her family, on grounds that police cannot intervene in a "civil dispute." The perpetrator fled after murdering the victim and committed suicide.

The anti-stalking law bans two kinds of behavior. *Tsukimato* (pursuing) is defined as acts based on romantic feelings or as revenge for unrequited feelings through such means as an ambush, property intrusion, persistent demands for dates, silent or repetitious telephone calls, mailing feces, sending emails as well as posting sexual images or texts online with the intention of shaming a victim. The other act, called stalking, refers to repeated acts of *tsukimato* that cause victims to feel that their safety, security or liberty are threatened.

In either case, victims must file a criminal complaint or a request for a warning before police can act. For *tsukimato*,



Under existing legislation, victims must accuse a person of being a stalker and file a criminal complaint before the police can move to prosecute a suspect.

Above: STEP Director Kayomi Kurihara leads a group discussion in Tokyo in August. Above left: Tomohiro Iwasaki sits in a car after being taken into custody for stabbing idol Mayu Tomita in Tokyo's Koganei in May (below left). Left: Iwasaki watches Tomita address a crowd before the attack. SATOKO KAWASAKI, KYODO

police can warn the offender verbally and/or in writing. If the warning is ignored, the Public Safety Commission can issue a restraining order to the offender. A continuation of stalking in violation of a restraining order is punishable by up to one year in prison or a maximum fine of ¥1 million.

Alternatively, for repeated acts of stalking, victims can file a criminal complaint and the perpetrator can be prosecuted. Convicted stalkers face a prison term of up to six months or a fine of ¥500,000.

According to the National Police Agency, the number of reported stalking cases has risen constantly over the past decade or so. A total of 21,968 cases were reported in 2015, up from 14,662 in 2001, when annual statistics became available for the first time following the introduction of the anti-stalking law in November 2000.

However, this does not necessarily mean that stalking itself has become more common. Experts believe the number of cases is rising because there is an increased public awareness of stalking, which has led to more victims reporting incidents to the police. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the proliferation of social networking services in recent years has made stalking technically easier.

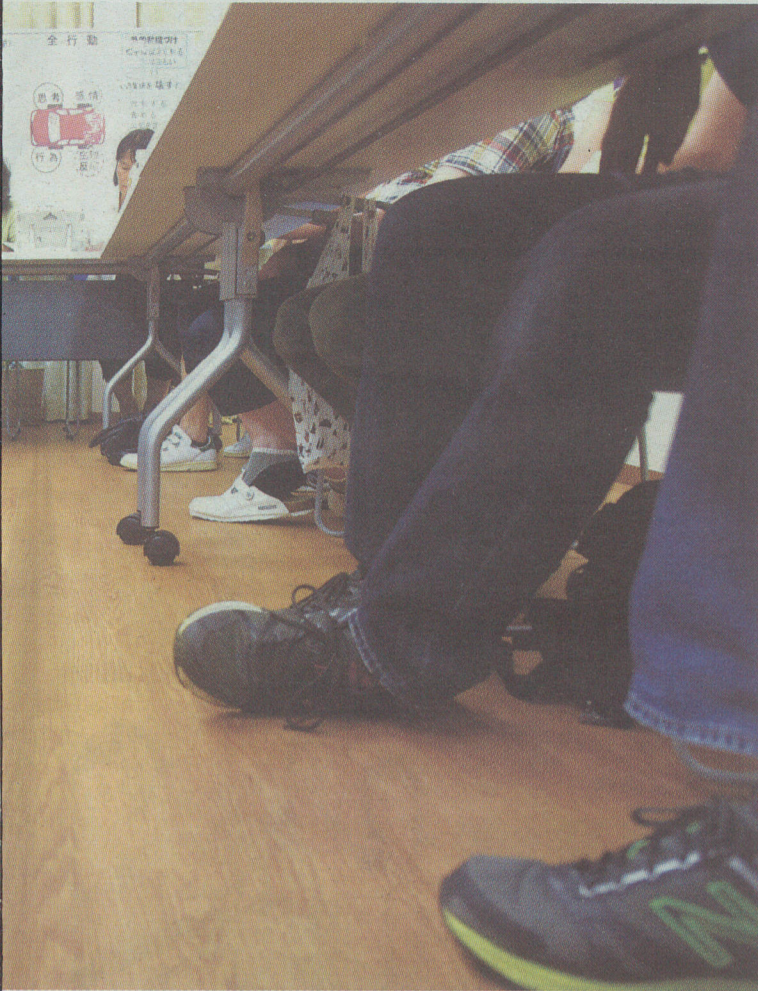
The attack of a young female idol in Koganei, western Tokyo, by a vengeful male fan in May can be seen as an example of how things have changed.

In that incident, Mayu Tomita, 20, was seriously injured after being stabbed more than 20 times in the neck and chest by Tomohiro Iwasaki, 27. Iwasaki, who later told investigators he wanted to marry her, had posted more than 300 public messages addressing her on Twitter.

In addition, Iwasaki sent her unsolicited gifts and grew hostile in his messages when his feelings weren't reciprocated.

As with the Okegawa murder and numerous other stalking cases, Tomita had asked the police for advice. However, the Musashino Police Station, which Tomita consulted, decided the posts were not alarming enough, according to media reports.

While the incident once again highlights the shortcomings of the anti-stalking law — the law does not regulate stalking via

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social networking services, though it has been revised recently to cover stalking by email — it also shows how easy it is for some individuals to be deluded into thinking that they have relationships with people they have never met, says Hiroki Fukui, a psychiatrist who has treated stalkers and offenders of sex crimes since 2010.

“It used to be difficult to approach idols,” Fukui says. “Now that people can feel that they’ve made a connection to somebody online, it’s easy for them to feel they have formed a relationship with them.”

In another case involving social media, Charles Thomas Ikenaga was arrested in October 2013 after stabbing high school student Aya Suzuki to death in Mitaka, Tokyo. The two met via Facebook, and Ikenaga started stalking her after they broke up.

In response to the Koganei attack, a team of lawmakers in the ruling coalition Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito recently drafted a proposal to revise the law in order to cover online harassment via social media. The proposal also calls for allowing police to issue restraining orders when the danger of harm is imminent, which would bypass the police’s existing need to issue a warning first.

NPA chief Masahito Kanetaka also convened a meeting of police officers in June, urging officers on the front line to be more alert to stalking complaints and move quickly to prevent violent crimes.

However, measures to crack down on stalkers have their limitations, experts say.

Perpetrators are not deterred by existing maximum penalties for stalking — a year in prison — and experts fear that offenders could return to inflict more grievous harm unless they are reformed.

Confronting the problem

Kurihara started a program that targeted stalkers in 2011, basing the contents on her decade-long experience of supporting victims of domestic violence at a shelter in Yokohama. She said she felt powerless shielding victims from abusive partners, as shelters by their very nature offer only a temporary relief. Every time these women left the shelters they were at risk of being attacked again — unless abusive partners are rehabilitated.

During a yearlong program comprised of 52 two-hour sessions, STEP participants — mostly men, but also a few women — learn through group discussions and role play how gender bias and an obsessive desire to control others leads to extreme thoughts.

Through the program, which is based



‘Unless we actively engage stalkers and assist them to change, the problem will not go away.’

STEP Director Kayomi Kurihara

Above: Police officers stand alongside Charles Thomas Ikenaga in Mitaka, Tokyo, in October 2013. Left: Hiroki Fukui has treated stalkers and offenders of sex crimes since 2010. Below left: STEP Director Kayomi Kurihara believes it’s important to engage stalkers.

KYODO, SATOKO KAWASAKI

on a U.S. psychotherapy called “the choice theory,” participants are also taught ways to listen to and respect the views of their estranged partners.

The program has proved effective for 80 percent of the 300 participants so far, Kurihara says, noting that participants — who range from teenagers to those in their 70s, and include doctors, professors and civil servants — attend the sessions grudgingly at first, often after being nudged by their partners or acquaintances.

“It’s not enough just to warn stalkers and set up shelters,” Kurihara says. “Unless we actively engage stalkers and assist them to change, the problem will not go away.”

Efforts to reform stalkers — with the ultimate goal of preventing recidivism — have a long way to go before they gain widespread public support in Japan.

Fukui says he often gets criticized for “helping” offenders. He says he cannot make the address of his clinics public, as neighbors would complain.

Fukui says he doesn’t condone stalkers or their acts.

“After seeing victims of sex crimes in my position as a psychiatrist, I became convinced it’s not possible to help the victims by only treating them,” he says. “Victims, including those of stalking, have been traumatized so much that their recovery is limited, even after five or 10 years of therapy. We need to treat the offenders to help the victims.”

Fukui has found cognitive behavioral therapy effective in his treatment of more than 150 people so far. His practice — which is not covered by national health insurance and therefore must be paid in full by the clients themselves — has proved so popular that he now has 20 psychologists offering counseling in Tokyo, Osaka and Fukuoka.

Fukui says many stalkers are in pain themselves, because they have not had the chance to grieve the loss of their partners properly.

Many of the stalkers come to the clinic out of their own wish to change their obsessive behavior.

“They have been deprived of their chances to complete the grief process (because their partners have left them). It’s

like the pain we go through when we lose our parents or pets,” he says. “They are in such pain that they cannot lead normal lives. They want to rebuild their lives.”

In order for Japan to beef up efforts to curb recidivism, the psychiatrist also believes it needs to bring down the wall of sectionalism in government bureaucracy and create a system where all related parties, including private-sector professionals, work together.

He cites the example of the so-called “national stalking clinic” program in the United Kingdom, where a community-based network of professionals assesses, treats and rehabilitates stalkers. Launched in 2011, the clinic’s team includes law enforcement officers, probation services, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and advocates for victims and offenders.

In the United Kingdom, officials in different agencies are legally mandated by a government program to collaborate in creating and implementing rehabilitation programs for offenders of sex crimes and other violent crimes, or face penalty.

Changes are afoot in Japan as well. A pilot program by the NPA to refer stalkers to psychiatrists and counselors was launched in April. However, Fukui says the budget for the program is too small to have a visible impact on stemming the crime.

One recent evening, I attended a two-hour session of STEP. Eleven men sat around a table and talked about how they were struggling to be more understanding of their partners, most of whom they were separated or divorced from.

The atmosphere was amicable and everyone was relaxed and friendly, even to a newcomer in his early 50s who introduced himself by saying, “I’ve just been arrested for kicking my wife in the foot.”

As one participant says after the session, however, the line that separates stalkers from nonstalkers is incredibly fine.

“When I hear about stalking crimes on TV, I don’t feel it’s someone else’s problem,” says a slim man in his early 40s who is wearing a yellow T-shirt. He has been separated from his wife due to his abusive behavior that involved pestering her with repeated phone calls and emails, as well as kicking and punching her.

“I grew up in a family where violence was tolerated as a form of discipline,” he says.

Had he not learned how to contain his anger by “reframing” his negative, vengeful thoughts, he could have theoretically taken the same path as the attacker in Koganei, he says.

“I could’ve been the one being accused of that crime instead,” he says.