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News

The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas
5323 Harry Hines Boulevard Dallas, Texas 75235 (214)688-3404

CONTACT: Ann Harrell
Office: 214/688-3404
Home: 214/369-2695
or: Ann Williams
Office: 214/688-3404
Home: 214/375-6043

* * * * * Abusive phone calls can mean danger.

DALLAS--It's the middle of the night. The woman is alone--her husband out of town on a business trip. The phone rings and she rolls over to fumble for the receiver, still half asleep.

"How would you like for me to come over there and #&\$%&*#&\$%&*#%? I'll be right there--wait for me!"

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Is this call a serious threat or a malicious--but harmless--joke? Is it an isolated occurrence or the beginning of a nightmare? How does the terrified victim know?

Dr. Stephen Golder, clinical psychologist who did his research at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, has studied abusive phone calls from the standpoint of a professional and, ironically, that of a victim--himself.

One of his most graphic recollections is the terror that a rape threat generated in an 81-year-old woman he and his wife were visiting.

"She took it quite seriously. And she should."

While many abusive callers fit the category of the lonely, socially maladjusted person seeking outlets for pent-up feelings and planning no subsequent violence, other callers definitely are dangerous, Dr. Golder says.

In studying police records in one large southern city, Dr. Golder found that one sixth of callers apprehended previously had been convicted of sex crimes or other offenses. Often the victim felt that she--and sometimes he, since members of both sexes make abusive calls--knew the caller.

"I used to be his girlfriend. Now he's out of prison, he's going to get me," said one victim. Another told police, "I know who it is. He raped my friend."

The majority of calls are from former spouses, those involved in some kind of triangle with the victim or simply casual acquaintances. Not usual are calls which follow an act of violence, according to a phone company employee who works with abuse complaints and often testifies in court cases. It may be that the victim of the abusive call has been robbed or raped by the caller a short time before.

Abusive phone calls--a general term which includes joke or prank calls, silent callers and obscene, threatening or harrassing ones--are a Class B misdemeanor in Texas, punishable by a fine up to \$1,000 and from one to six months in jail. According to the Texas penal code, a person commits an offense if "he intentionally communicates by telephone in vulgar, profane, obscene, indecent or threatening language and by his action intentionally, knowingly or recklessly alarms or intends to alarm the recipient; or if the caller places one or more telephone calls anonymously...and by this action recklessly annoys or alarms the recipient or intends to do so."

The best way to handle abusive calls is to hang up, says Dr. Golder, who has received homosexual invitations and anonymous harrassments himself. By hanging up, the recipient gives the caller no satisfaction.

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People who listen to abusive calls should be aware, the psychologist cautions, that they may be unconsciously participating. Comments like, "Oh, how awful! You must be sick!" actually encourage rather than discourage the caller.

Women should realize that by listing themselves by their full names rather than their initials in the phone book they may be more likely to draw the attention of the abusive caller. One should also be cautious of being too free with personal information such as names and addresses with strangers.

Dr. Golder advises the recipient of repetitive abusive calls to have the number changed, to get an unlisted number or to ask the phone company's business office to put a tracer on the telephone for a few weeks. Bear in mind, however, that if the call is traced, police will want to prosecute.

There should be no hesitation about calling the police if a threat is involved, says the UTHSCD graduate.

One way of evaluating an anonymous call as to danger is how much the caller knows about you and how specific he or she is in what is said. "If he describes things like your car and your pink nightgown, then you should be concerned and definitely call the police."

And while some people keep loud whistles near the phones to startle abusive callers, Golder does not think that is a good idea. "You may actually anger the caller so much that you set up a harrassing situation."

A large number of the abusive calls, including those classified as obscene, are from children. This is a way of doing something daring, imitating adults, trying out forbidden language. Teen-agers who place obscene calls usually have these same motives. Older adolescents may also be using the telephone to test out their changing feelings about sex and closeness and distance. In fact, two population samples in Golder's study are made up of students at a large university, and these findings may reflect a rather prolonged adolescence.

The psychologist was surprised to find that many of the students had made at least one abusive phone call at some time in their lives. These calls were most usually made by males, often when in a group and when drinking alcohol. Recipients in the college samples were more likely to accept the calls as a joke.

Definite personality differences showed up in the police and the college groups. Contrary to the profile of the lonely, socially inept person without sufficient outlets for his feelings, Golder found the college caller quite different. The college students who made abusive calls were generally more socially adjusted and out-going than those who did not. So were the recipients, who also tended to be more highly visible on the campus than the girls who had not received calls.

A common target of abusive callers is the telephone operator. The psychologist recently did a training film for Southwestern Bell's state operator services with operators and customers on handling phone calls courteously. Frustration on the part of the customer seems to be the cause of some of the abuse suffered by the operators who are also prime targets of many obscene calls. "After all, dial 0, and you've got an audience."

Operators transfer these calls to their supervisors who are trained to deal with these situations. At another phone company, the supervisors transfer obscene calls to Dial-a-Prayer.

Male telephone operators are more numerous today. So they share obscene calls. One said he had received about 200 in two years. Several reported getting about 60 percent which were homosexual in nature and 40 percent which were heterosexual.

Female operators receive far more obscene calls than their male counterparts. Most, of course, are from men. Some, however, are from women describing homosexual acts.

The abusive phone call, Golder reminds us, is a product of the twentieth century. Its predecessor was the anonymous letter. Use of the telephone for abusive calls really took off in the early 60s when private lines replaced party lines all over the country. For the first time, callers could be assured of complete anonymity, something certainly not possible in a small town where Aunt Sallie might be listening in on the party line. According to the last census, 96 percent of the homes in the U.S. have at least one phone.

Golder calls the telephone "the perfect medium for abuse" because of this anonymity and the potential for quick escape. All the caller has to do is hang up. And the next victim is just seven digits away.

Another possible reason for the increase in abusive phone calls in the 60s is what some sociologists today are calling the breakdown of the social norms following the assassination of President Kennedy. Whether or not this assumption is correct, it is obvious that there is now far greater sexual permissiveness than 20 years ago. And, Golder points out, psychological theorists say there are various degrees of such elements as aggression and hostility in sexual excitement, as well as a degree of mystery. Again, the telephone is a convenient outlet for these feelings and desires.

Not only are the elements of sexuality and violence mixed in the obscene phone call, says Golder, but sometimes the calls themselves are difficult to classify. The obscene call often describes a sexual act with a threat also implied or stated. Calls where nothing is said--either the caller hangs up or breathes heavily--may be interpreted differently by those who receive them. Also, what is a joke to one person may seriously offend or horrify another.

And no one should feel bad about receiving an abusive call, says the psychologist who presented his findings at this year's Midwest Psychological Association meeting. It's something that happens to most people at least once in their lives.

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NOTE: Dr. Golder will be available after Sept. 22. Dallas area media may contact Dr. William H. Tedford, psychologist who is special member of the graduate school faculty at UTHSCD.

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