

'WHERE WERE you LAST NIGHT?'

LOCATION TRACKING APPS ARE PRESENTED AS PROTECTIVE PERSONAL SAFETY TOOLS, YET THEIR IMPACT ON OUR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS IS POTENTIALLY CORROSIVE – EVEN, IN SOME CASES, DANGEROUS.

BY ROBYN MACLARTY

Personal safety?



IT is hardly surprising that location tracking apps have become popular in South Africa. Also known as 'personal safety' apps, they share your real-time location with whomever you've agreed to share it with. This is potentially life-saving technology, considering South Africa's high crime and gender-based violence rates, and the fact that 2 000 kidnapping cases were opened between July and September 2021.

Safety is marketed as the main reason you may want to introduce these kinds of monitoring systems into your family or intimate relationship. Often, as is the case with Namola – one of South Africa's most popular location tracking apps, with more than 400 000 downloads – the app also features access to emergency services.

The applications are many and varied: keeping tabs on your children's after-school activities, making sure your teens are where they say they are, monitoring your partner's progress when they are travelling over a long distance or late at night, or simply knowing how close you are to home so your husband knows when to put the spaghetti on.

'We use Life360 so we can track each other,' says Samantha, department head at a major retailer, of her husband and two sons. 'But my children are both at university and we all share a house and two cars. We have never tracked their internet behaviour or had curfews... but knowing where we all are just seems, I don't know, polite? People are often surprised that we use a tracker, but no one in the family has ever raised an objection, and the

benefits are compelling. If you're driving from A to B, you can check easily if anyone is en route and could be offered a lift. You can track when someone is near enough when you're thinking of cooking, or whether it's worth cooking a family meal at all. You can watch someone on a road trip for peace of mind. You can recommend drinks in certain bars. You can know when someone's decided to walk the dogs in the park and join them. It kind of weaves into life and makes fluid ideas more shareable. Mainly, though, we just like knowing where we all are.'

There certainly is a lot to recommend such apps, but all technology is open to abuse, and the means to track the location of others may present a host of unintended consequences and questions around privacy.

Is it right for you?

If your partner suggested you both use a tracking app in the interest of safety, how would you feel? Such a request could easily reveal any disparate expectations you and your partner may have about your right to privacy in a relationship.

'Social technologies have a lot of implicit assumptions that are a reflection of each person's beliefs and experiences,' says Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center in the US, writing for Psychology Today. 'With new tech, we rarely talk about what it means to use it before we jump into the fray – how could we? All this stuff is new. Consider how

you attribute meaning to the length of time it takes someone to return your text, message or email, or liking your Instagram pic or commenting on your Facebook post. We are social creatures and inherently attribute meaning and intention to these actions – often without checking the accuracy of these assumptions.'

If you're considering bringing one of these apps into your relationship, your immediate gut feeling about whether or not you're okay with it is the best place to begin.

'Location monitoring – in fact, any monitoring at all – in a healthy relationship will always feel emotionally and physically safe,' says Pretoria-based clinical psychologist Antoinette Nicolaou. 'For example, both partners will feel comfortable and almost indifferent to the use of the app, as both understand that the use will be only for emergencies, or whatever the agreed-on rules are for each particular couple, such as the need to know if you should start dinner.'

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Conversely, any unease around the use of such an app should be examined. Red flags, suggests Nicolaou, include feeling wary, unsafe (emotionally or physically), entrapped, bullied, controlled, spied on or undermined, and the sense that your partner doesn't trust you.

These apps are certainly dangerous in the hands of an abusive

partner (see 'Safety vs stalking'), but in many instances there is a risk that they may amplify our all-too-human everyday insecurities, even in a relatively stable relationship.

'While safety and practicality may be at the forefront of conscious motives for using such an app, a tracking app could tip you down the proverbial rabbit hole and play into both partners' unconscious scripts,' says Cape Town-based clinical psychologist Joanne Laskey. 'Our loved one may consciously have good motives, but unconsciously there may be other fears that are triggered, for example, either by seeing that your partner is visiting undisclosed locations, or by feeling controlled by being tracked. This can lead to unnecessary relationship difficulties.'

In her practice, Laskey has had numerous clients who use tracking apps in a variety of contexts. 'In some cases it can help prevent the partner relapsing on drugs or alcohol. Certain locations are designated "no-go zones". In most instances, however, this does not go well. When someone wants to relapse they push hard against their partner, and this can be very difficult for both parties. Outside monitoring is most often not helpful, unless the person suffering from the addiction themselves specifically requests it.'

'In other cases, tracking was used to find out if the partner was cheating. This led to all sorts of paranoia and accusations, some of which were not true. Such tracking created a strong feeling of entrapment and abuse, which made the partner want to "escape" the controlling partner. This makes the relationship worse rather than better. There are other signs and ways to know if a partner is cheating, and if trust is lost between two people, one has to question the broader context



Protecting your boundaries

of the relationship, rather than just looking at infidelity. Infidelity is often a symptom of deeper troubles in a relationship.'

Nicolaou has also encountered clients trying to track their partners. 'We see this often in abusive relationships, relationships with toxic co-dependency, relationships where there has been damage to trust through infidelity, or in the case of separation or divorce.'

For many of us, drawing boundaries can be challenging, especially around something as seemingly innocent as your partner's wish to be assured of your personal safety.

Why wouldn't you want your partner to know your location? What have you got to hide? It's for your own safety, after all.

'You are allowed to set boundaries,' Nicolaou says. 'This may disappoint and sometimes anger others, but saying no and having your "no" make someone else angry does not mean that you should have said yes.'

'It might be expected in a relationship where insecurities already exist for a partner who is being told no to feel suspicious of why the other does not want a tracking app. Again, the question becomes why the insecurities are present in the relationship in the first place. Has there been a history of infidelity? Does one partner have challenges with trust in general that would have been present before the relationship? Or do both partners have a trust wound?'



Any underlying insecurities in the relationship should be addressed before a location tracking app is introduced. Location tracking should never serve as a substitute for trust.

If personal safety is the true motivation for introducing such an app, then agree on parameters that you're comfortable with, such as only using the app when one of you is taking a trip or leaving work late at night.



Safety vs stalking?

The first few search items that come up when you google 'tracking your partner' are the following:

- '3 ways to track your wife's phone without her knowing'
- 'How to track my husband's phone without him knowing'
- 'How to track your boyfriend's phone without him knowing'
- 'How to track your cheating spouse with GPS'

The dark side of personal safety apps is that they can be used to spy on or to stalk someone. Those who are in an abusive relationship are generally the most vulnerable, since their partner would have relatively easy access to their phone.

Even if you do not give your consent, it is possible for someone who has access to your phone to secretly install a 'spyware' app on your phone without your knowledge. For this reason,

it's a very good idea to protect access to your phone with a passcode that only you know.

Location tracking is the least of it. One of these 'stalkerware' apps is called Flash Keylogger for Android. Marketed as a monitoring device for parents concerned about their children's online activity, once installed, the app shares all of a phone's keystrokes (essentially every email, text and direct message) with a second party (the parent, in theory). Partnered with a location tracking app, this would make it possible for someone to monitor almost all of our day-to-day activity, considering how much of our lives we conduct through our phones.

The scariest part? Flash Keylogger can be disguised as a calendar or calculator. And it's one of many.



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According to *The New York Times*, ‘Flash Keylogger is part of a rapidly expanding group of apps known as “stalkerware”. While these apps numbered in the hundreds a few years ago, they have since grown into the thousands. They are widely available on Google’s Play Store and to a lesser degree on Apple’s App Store, often with innocuous names like MobileTool, Agent and Cerberus. From last September to May [2020], the number of devices infected with stalkerware jumped 63%, according to a study by the security firm NortonLifeLock.’



Think it couldn't happen to you?

A 2021 report by global cybersecurity company Kaspersky found that, of 21 000 respondents in 21 countries, 30% found it acceptable to monitor their partner without their consent under specific circumstances. They also calculated that 318 users in South Africa had found out they had stalkerware programmes on their phones.

My own informal vox pop found that 27% of respondents would install a location tracking app on their partner’s phone if they felt justified (for example, their partner was hiding something, or they suspected their partner was cheating).

The true scale of the problem is not yet known, but perhaps the more urgent question is: how can we protect ourselves?

A new Cybercrimes Act was passed in 2021, making it possible to prosecute the ‘illegal interception

of data’. However, it is untested, and it remains to be seen how effectively it will be enforced.

Alas, there is no one-size-fits all answer. Advice for those who simply suspect there may be stalkerware on their phone, but who are not in an abusive relationship or fearful for their personal safety, will differ from advice for those who may be at risk of retaliation from an intimate partner in the event that stalkerware is removed.

HERE ARE A FEW POINTERS FOR THE FORMER:

- According to *PC Magazine*, resetting your phone to its factory settings should remove any undetected stalkerware. Back up any important data before doing so or you may lose it. It’s safest to reinstall apps manually thereafter, or you may accidentally reinstall the spyware.
- To find out which free apps you can download to detect stalkerware on your device, visit the Coalition Against Stalkerware’s website (stopstalkerware.org).
- If you do find stalkerware on your phone, take screenshots or collect any evidence you can before resetting your phone, in the event that you wish to press charges.
- Although stalkerware can be difficult to detect, even for experts, signs could include a battery that runs down faster than usual; your phone runs out of space or data sooner than expected, your phone switches on and off; or your location services arrow is on all the time.

- In general, Android smartphones seem to be more vulnerable to stalkerware than Apple iPhones.
- Buy a new phone, and do not reinstall any back-up data. This is the surest way to get rid of stalkerware on your phone.

IF YOU ARE AFRAID YOUR PARTNER OR STALKER MIGHT RETALIATE:

- Do not remove or give any indication that you wish to remove the stalkerware before first considering your own safety. Create a safety plan with a safety advocate (see ‘Organisations that assist victims of stalking’), and make contact with them through channels other than your personal devices so as not to alert your stalker. Only remove stalkerware once you are sure it is safe to do so.
- If you wish to take legal action, seek help from the police to find out how to collect evidence before you remove the stalkerware.
- Visit the Coalition Against Stalkerware website – from a safe device – for further information: stopstalkerware.org ❖

PHOTOGRAPHS: XXX

Organisations that assist victims of stalking

- ▶ **People Against Women Abuse (POWA):**
powa.co.za/POWA;
076 694 5911
- ▶ **Families South Africa (FAMSA):** famsawc.org.za;
021 447 7951
- ▶ **LifeLine:** 0800 150 150
- ▶ **Tears Foundation:** tears.co.za;
010 590 5920; *134*7355#