



Counselling Post School Shooting Incidents: What are the Issues?

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. The first author conceptualized the review and all authors contributed to the literature review. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

School shootings, church shootings and even library and disco shootings are becoming more common. Counsellors are often called upon to assist, to provide comfort and solace and to help individuals cope and deal with the immense tragedy that is often unexplainable. This paper will address some of the past research in this realm, and cursorily review the literature and will attempt to address some of the research questions that need to be addressed and investigated. Death is something that is difficult for many to address. The death of a close friend or a classmate in a school shooting is even more terrible. The aftermath of such an event is EVEN MORE horrible as flashing images careen across one's mind and often cause nightmares and other post-traumatic difficulties. To witness one's best friend being shot or to observe a fellow student (or a complete stranger) firing bullets into the bodies of classmates is surely an event that no student anticipates. Yet it is occurring with greater and greater frequency across the United States and literally around the world. The student is under assault in the place that perhaps he has felt most secure- in a building led by adults who seem to be protective, caring individuals. Suddenly they are thrust into a classroom filled with blood and dead bodies of their classmates or fellow athletes and they may even have seen a teacher give their own life in an attempt to save or protect his or her students.

Keywords: Violence; school shooting; counseling; post traumatic stress disorder.

1. THE GAMUT OF EMOTIONS

There is an extreme gamut of emotions felt by student's post-school shooting. Tochterman [1] has elaborated on these feelings that run the gamut from anger to frustration to sadness to despair. It is indicated that the following emotions are pervasive and need to be addressed following a school shooting.

- 1) Fear- Students are apprehensive and do not know what may later transpire and what could conceivably continue to happen. Information may not be forthcoming that the school is a safe environment as there may be other shooters roaming the building.
- 2) Sadness- Following the shooting, there may be a pervasive sadness about the event with students wondering how this could have happened to their school, in their community.
- 3) Shock- For some students, such an event was somewhat inconceivable that it could have occurred in their school, or in their church or library. Belief is suspended so to speak.
- 4) Distrust and suspicion later follow as pupils may begin to imagine that the event could occur again, and they become suspicious of new individuals or new comments that another student might make. There may be distrust of teachers and other school personnel to "keep them safe".
- 5) Many indicate a "need to foster relationships" and tell parents how much they mean to them, to tell friends how special they are and to nurture other perhaps withdrawn students who may be hurting following the event.
- 6) Anger- This emotion could be directed toward school personnel who may not have taken as much direct action as is felt should have been taken. In several school shootings, it later became apparent that one of the shooters had been referred and identified, but apparently little was done to intervene.
- 7) Respect and compassion for others seem to emanate as human life is now viewed as sacred, important, and there is a feeling of empathy for others who may have witnessed the attack.
- 8) Avoidance and Reactivity- Some students become very sensitive to loud noises and are apprehensive about any congregation

(such as in a cafeteria) where many people are gathered.

In follow up interviews, Tochterman [1] indicated that many students felt annoyance at increased security measures that were put in place, as well as more security personnel in the building. Further, fear was another emotion reported post-shooting event. Poland and McCormick [2] have indicated that some typical reactions to the crisis are as follows: increased or high anxiety, denial, anger, remorse, grief and later reconciliation. There is no specific timeline for the resolution or even manifestation of these emotional reactions.

Review of the Literature

Kuban [3] has investigated the realm of curiosity-driven interventions following any crisis including a school shooting. Sadly, at the time that this was written, it was noted that since 1982, there had been 62 school shootings. Obviously there have been more than that since the time of that publication and also, there have been church and library shootings as well as the Las Vegas incident. The Kuban indicates quite clearly that "interventions following crisis, such as school shootings, must be trauma informed, safe and supportive" (p.42)

For children, Kuban [3] has suggested the following questions. They reflect the thinking of Steele and Kuban [4].

When it happened, where did you feel the hurt the most in your body?
Is the hurt still there?
How big or small is the hurt?
Does the hurt ever go away?
When does it go away?
Is there something you do that makes it go away?
Is there someone who makes it go away?
Is there something or someone that makes it come back?
How long has the hurt been there?
What happened that caused the hurt?
Have you told anyone about your hurt?
What did they say to you about your hurt?
If your hurt had a name, what would it be?
If your hurt could talk what would it say?
If it could listen, what would you say to it?
Is there a song that would best describe what your hurt is like?
What does your hurt look like (p. 44)

Some would say that the above questions reflect somewhat of a gestalt approach, others would indicate that there is almost an over-emphasis on the emotional pain that the person may be feeling. Fein, Carlisle, and Isaacson's [5] article explored the reality of school counsellor experience, behavior, and unforeseen school counsellor responsibility following school shootings. Based on prior research conducted both by other researchers and the authors themselves, four lessons school counsellors surmised after having dealt with a shoot shooting first-hand were surmised. The four lessons Fein, Carlisle, and Isaacson found were: (a) School counsellors took on unexpected leadership roles due to their position. (b) Serving two organizations simultaneously creates conflict. (c) School counsellors were placed in situations where formal leadership unwittingly needed counselling so the school counsellors found subtle ways of helping. (d) School counsellors found it necessary to perform self-care while administering to the trauma they were immersed.

Lesson One: Be Prepared to Lead

While school counsellors were conducting the duties that may be expected of them - meeting the demands of students, staff, and administrators - additional duties of becoming the contact liaison with emergency services (police, rescue squads), ensuring student safety, facilitating staff needs, performing administrative directives, and dealing with the media feel upon their shoulders. In the aftermath of school shootings, school counsellors needed to carefully deal with all these organizations and remain calm while those they came in contact were under duress themselves due to the circumstances. School counsellors received no training in the additional duties and were not formally required to carry out these duties but found they were, in actuality, conferred these tasks in the heat of the moment. School counsellors described teachers, students, and administrators holding themselves together in public but deferring leadership to school counsellors and looking to them for emotional support when in school counsellors' presence. This deferment of power was encountered when formal organizational leadership was unprepared for the rigors of dealing with the organizational details of a school shooting.

Lesson Two: Serving Two Organizations Creates Role Conflict

Teachers are often busy dealing with their students in the aftermath of a school shooting

and administrators are often unavailable, which leads to school counsellors handling additional responsibilities. The additional responsibilities precluded school counsellors from being able to handle individual counselling needs. This meant school counsellors had to recruit counselling services from organizations volunteering services such as local religious leaders, non-school counsellors, and those calling themselves counsellors but later found to have no license. Thus, decisions made on the spot to provide emergency counselling service were later second-guessed due to school counsellors being overwhelmed by their additional unofficial duties in the absence of formal leadership.

Lesson Three: Employ Subtle Counseling

That informal leadership felt they needed to be strong in the public eye and were not afforded the time or ability of self-care. The services made available to others were poorly attended by formal leadership. Despite formal leadership not availing themselves of available services, school counsellors in close contact with them found they were often needed to perform subtle counselling techniques of allowing the opportunity to vent and normalizing the emotions when formal leadership voiced those concerns. By understanding the pressures and self-imposed expectations for self-care of formal leadership, school counsellors were able to perform subtle counselling techniques that alleviated some of the issues faced by these administrators.

Lesson Four: Minister to Thyself

School counsellors were impacted by the school shooting as much as anyone, including the leaders they were administering treatment. With stress, lack of sleep, an overabundance of formal and informal duties, school counsellors had to see to their own self-care and recognized the symptoms of their own issues. This recognition of their own issues occasionally made school counsellors more sensitive to those they came across in the community hosting issues brought about the school shooting.

The authors recommended formal training for school counsellors about unexpected leadership roles inherent with school shootings in addition to training for formal leaders in how to undertake the leadership they may be inadvertently and inappropriately abdicating to school counsellors. Another recommendation was for counsellor educators to petition politicians and state school

leaders for the above training. To reduce stress, co-leadership is suggested with more clearly delineated roles preventing ambiguity.

The authors were in favor of continuing the informal role of subtle counselling by school counsellors in working with leaders instead of attempting to impose regulated care. The system seemed to have worked and the school counsellors were able to invoke subtle techniques in an appropriate manner that helped the leaders. As far as self-care of school counsellors, they preferred to endure the possible ongoing detriments sustained while attending to others instead of adhering to the recommendation of debriefing after three to four hours of attending to those experiencing trauma. School counsellors seemed unlikely to discontinue the self-sacrifice despite possible long-term ill effects. One caveat that seemed to carry weight with school counsellors was the thought that they needed self-care to be prepared to deal with the possibility of a future similar incident; hence, leading them to seek self-care sooner.

Liu & Kia-Keating's [6] study used narrative writing as a mode of treatment for survivors of trauma from the Isla Vista Tragedy killing six students and injuring fourteen. The narrative writing treatment entailed survivors dedicating five to twenty minutes to writing a description of their thoughts and emotions pertaining to the experience over consecutive days to facilitate process, growth, and recovery. The participants were split into two groups: (a) 18 participants using affirmation narrative writing composed of writing about values and defining values thus promoting strength and recovery (b) 21 participants writing freely about their thoughts and emotions without guidelines regarding affirmations. Participants were 77% female and 23% male with an average age of 20.7 with the ethnicity of 32% White, 32% Asian-American/Pacific Islander, 13% Latino/a, 13% Middle Eastern, 8% African-American, and 2% multiracial.

The participants filled out the Brief Trauma Questionnaire revealing an average of 2.1 traumatic events and exposure varied from one direct injury from the violence, five witnessed injured individuals, fourteen knew a murdered individual, and sixteen knew someone injured.

Issues measured included coping self-efficacy (CSE), posttraumatic growth (PTG), and posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS).

There was no difference between groups, but both groups experienced benefits deemed significant as measured by CSE. CSE improvement correlated with a diminished PTSS score but PTG was not. PTG did not show an improvement in this study despite prior studies having shown benefits.

In conclusion in this study, it seemed that narrative writing helped the students in both groups. This intervention was a short-term intervention easily administered online at a low cost and taking little time to administer. Not only was it easy to administer but it was reported to be easy to use by the participants. Participants were only asked to write for four consecutive days and, despite the brevity, measured differences in CSE occurred. Consequently, narrative writing as an intervention following mass university violence may be an inexpensive and easily administered intervention for helping organizations to implement directly following a university mass shooting event.

Collison and And [7] described a terrifying scene and the resultant teambuilding and alienation that occurred following a school shooting. Immediate responses included wound care, crowd control, and communication with everyone outside the school. Responses and impacts beyond the first few days were complex and in some cases, unexpected. Prior to the shooting, a crisis management plan was not in place. Their article describes the results, impacts and shaping of a crisis management plan following this horrific tragedy.

The shooting occurred on a Monday. By Wednesday, the school psychologist, school nurse and the elementary, middle and high school counsellors had formed the Pupil Service Team.

The Pupil Service Team provided services to those in need and maintained connections with each other as they began to serve following the shooting. The team identified shy, withdrawn students, considering this population to be at-risk. They contacted loved ones of those killed and provided resources to all parents within their respective schools. The team supported teachers as they discussed the shooting with their students. The five team members created a schedule that provided constant availability to students. An outside counsellor was brought in to support the team itself.

As the Pupil Service Team provided these interventions, they received significantly more referrals, in some cases double the norm, for counselling services. Time after time, they were asked to counsel children whom others feared may one day walk into their school with a gun and begin taking lives. An additional school counsellor was hired to help with the increased caseload. The impact rippled to nearby districts and referrals for counselling and evaluation increased there, as well.

An atmosphere of anger, fear, and embarrassment churned within the community. Simultaneously, teachers banded together and began missing fewer work days.

Shortly after the Pupil Service Team formed, the community hired a thanatologist and other mental health professionals from out of town to assist with needed services. However, as the media presented these relief efforts, they did not advertise the Pupil Service Team, but rather the consultants and thanatologist.

Despite the media disconnect and the chaos of emotions, the authors emphasize that we must learn from this story. Following the shooting, a group of school counsellors rapidly formed a critical service team. The Pupil Service Team sprang to action and provided invaluable services. But prior to this disaster, the school did not have a crisis plan in place.

The authors emphasize, without judgment, that a previously established plan is crucial. Current and past crises must be discussed and drawn from, as this article demonstrates and documents. The crisis plan extends beyond evacuation methods and codes words. It must take care of its members, recruit more support, connect with the school's community, and, unfortunately, it must be in place and ready for action.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute suffered one of the most exhausting losses in mass shooting history, with a death toll of 33 lives, leaving countless families and professionals stunned by what happened. In an article "Connecting the Dots: Lessons from the Virginia Tech Shootings" written by Gordon K. Davies, government officials such as Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, and a panel interview 200 people to find out why this happened and how they could prevent such a tragedy from happening again. This article talks about the events that occurred, structural issues

within the school/health system, university management, the state governments role, actions that took place on the ground and concludes with seven important considerations for preventing a school shooting on a college campus.

Summary of Events

Davies (8) starts in detail about the events that happened on April 16, 2007, naming Seung Hui Cho, a senior at the institution, as the culprit behind the shootings. Cho shot and killed 2 students first and before word could get out about the killings he managed to make it back to his dorm and change his bloody wardrobe to somewhat of a student, so he could blend in with the chaos of the crowd. Once changed, he went to mail a letter to NBC detailing his contempt for his peers and faculty by labelling them, "privileged, spoiled, and morally corrupted by a materialistic society" (Davies,8 , p. 10).

Cho went even further by calling out one of his professors for "holocausting" him (Davies, 8). Once Cho mailed the letters to NBC, he went back to Norris hall where classrooms and offices are located, and he locked the doors and began his killing spree. Cho was carrying two semi-automatic rifles, 400 rounds of ammunition, a hammer, and a knife (Davies, 8). It took the police three minutes to arrive at the scene and after Cho heard the shotgun blast to unlock the doors he had turned the gun on himself. He was found with 200 unused bullets (Davies, 8). Davies concludes telling the events by saying that "the individuals who were directly or indirectly involved will carry the experience with them for the rest of their lives" [Davies, 8, p.10].

After the event, Governor Kane and his panel interviewed 200 people ranging from administrative officials, faculty and staff, parents, police, emergency staff, and experts in various dimensions regarding the incident about what led up to it. Additionally, the parents and sister of Cho were interviewed. At the end of the review, the panel concluded that there were concerns about the structure of the institution, management, and actions on the ground that took place.

Structural Concerns

The structural issues included public mental health care issues, gun laws, and privacy laws. The public mental health care system, in Virginia,

and nationwide have been underfunded for years. Many issues including the shortages of outpatient beds, deinstitutionalization of people with mental disabilities was not a viable policy and the assessments of the patients were done too quickly [Davies,8].

Gun laws, such as the Federal Gun Control Act of 1968, prohibit gun purchases by anyone who is a danger to himself or to others or who has been committed to a mental institution (Davies, 8). However, in Virginia, a criminal check must be conducted for a transaction with a registered gun dealer, although guns can be purchased from a private entity, such as gun shows, without a background check. In all reality, if Cho was prevented from buying guns from a dealer, he would be able to buy them privately [Davies, 8].

When dealing with privacy laws such as the Family Education Records Policy Act (FERPA) and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), they could get confusing. For example, Cook Counseling centre at Virginia Tech falls under FERPA and the Corilion St. Albans Behavioral Health Center falls under HIPAA. Cho was sent to Corilion St. Albans Behavioral Health Center in December 2005 because he was considered a danger to himself and others under Temporary Detention Order (TDO) (Davies, 8). Cook Counseling center and Corilion were in communication about Cho but Cook would be violating FERPA if they reciprocated [Davies, 8].

A Virginia Tech representative mentioned it would be a violation if Cook shared its disciplinary records with campus police. However, Virginia Tech shares them on the condition that the Police chief can view it as an educational interest within those records [Davies, 8]. Since FERPA seems like a restrictive law, it prevents teachers and other school officials from sharing information, even if that information could stop a tragedy.

Management Concerns

The managerial concerns involved the handling of the troubled student and the emergency preparation for the event. History of why Cho was deemed a danger of himself and to others is of when he took pictures of female students, stalking them, the use of violent writings, and unwillingness to participate in classes. Although Virginia has a plan in place to handle individuals with behavioral problems, they took no action.

Cho then took matters into his own hands and called Cook counselling center and they took down information but was never treated or diagnosed. Cho went on to do irregular things such as continue to stalk women, he told his roommate he might as well kill himself and was later given a TDO. During this time, Cho was later diagnosed with selective mutism and it was discovered he had been intrigued by the Columbine shooting in Colorado. Information was also given saying that he often fantasized about carrying out a similar mass killing. Yet, no one connected the dots.

Virginia Tech was ready to unveil their new emergency text message on April 16 but only a few people signed up for it. Instead, email messages were circulating. Two hours after the killing of the first two students the first message was sent out. The persons interviewed said that officials didn't want to cause a stir within the community, so they decided to send out that two people were shot but didn't specify that they were killed, or that the killer was still on the loose.

After the shootings happened, the university established a family assistance centre but failed because there was a lack of leadership, lack of coordination among service providers, and lack of training. However, with all the disadvantages Virginia Tech presented, the individuals that worked stayed in touch with the families for weeks to make sure they received the right services.

State Governments Role

Issues regarding the state government's role include, similarly like Tech, communication struggles. The state government failed to have an establish information centre with experienced public information professionals who could manage the questions sought after by parents and inquirers. In result, families of slain victims and families of survivors couldn't get the information about their spouses, children and others who attended the school.

Actions taken/ Lessons learned

Police made errors the day of the mass shootings. One of them is, after two hours, the message sent didn't show that two people have been killed. Actually, it conveyed that the shooter had already left the campus. Another was that they failed to notify the entire campus that the

killer remained at large. Even though Cho sent out letters to NBC letting them know that he was the killer, they still should have let the campus know who to watch out for, whether he is still around, and cancel classes for the day.

Overall, this article ends with seven distinct lessons learned from this massacre; such as, states should provide sufficient outpatient mental health services, states should comply with the Federal Gun Control Act, Congress and the state legislatures should review federal and state privacy laws and universities should know what they do and do not permit, colleges and universities should communicate both within themselves and beyond. There needs to be a plan and made with formal arrangements, with frequent practice; lastly, develop a way to access students mental health records [Davies, 8].

The chances of school shootings happening, like this one, are slim, but every death that involves a mass shooting is an unfathomable loss to a mother, father or spouse. The concerns for this university are accurate and valid. After this event, more than half of the students signed up for the text message alert system and the government was able to update some of the ambiguous gun laws so this can never happen again. Unfortunately, no one can predict these sorts of things happening, but with the right plans in action, preventable laws in place, and university management adequately positioned, this may mitigate the chance of reoccurrence.

2. THE POST TRAUMA INTERVENTIONS

Some may believe that “school, church and library” shootings only occur in America. However, Turunen and Punamaki [9] have reported on the professional led peer support group process that was implemented after one school shooting in Finland. This school shooting occurred in Kauhajoki in Finland in 2008. There had been a previous one in Jokela, Finland where six students, a school nurse and a headmaster were shot. In the peer support group process- several stages and themes were brought up. Survivors were taught to understand the multiple consequences of such a tragic, traumatic loss. While the event was seen as extreme, there was also a message the recovery, with time, was possible certain specific days were thought to be imperative- Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, holidays and the anniversaries of these shootings.

Liu and Kia-Keating [6] have attempted to improve coping self-efficacy in the distressed student that were exposed to university mass violence. This was a pilot online investigation. Their research investigated coping self- efficacy as well as posttraumatic growth, and high levels of completion were noted. Implications and basic recommendations were discussed.

Jordan [10] has provided a trauma and “recovery model” for those impacted by a school shooting. She describes these shootings as “catastrophic” and has indicated the need to focus on behavior, cognitive aspects, and the need to examine the psychological effects on the school, the students, and the needs of those impacted. Often the impact of a school shooting is not clearly understood and all too often the responses of those impacted are not extensively investigated or recognized or validated. This is a significant issue as so many media and other social media sites have described this as the “new normal” as if those impacted were just supposed to shake off the traumatic event and return to school, perhaps in the next week and all teachers and students are to return to learning as if a simple rain shower disrupted the school day.

Williams [11] has investigated how schools respond to traumatic events (such as the suicide death of a student, the death of a teacher, and school shootings). Globally addressing some of these events as terrorism, the author has provided a number of ideas for classroom interventions, homework assignments and has suggested that both the short term and the long-term need to be specifically addressed.

3. NEEDED FUTURE RESEARCH

There is much-needed research in this realm. First of all, those who have been shot and have recovered may present different issues than others who have simply witnessed the shooting in close proximity. Often one hears about “survivors’ guilt” and question why some deity allowed them to live while taking a close friend or classmate.

Secondly, there may be family members who have lost a husband or wife to a school or church or library shooting. A teachers’ wife may have sent her husband off with a sandwich and a carafe of coffee to later receive a very bad phone call or even hear about the event on a local television station.

The teacher has left behind a wife and children while protecting or attempting to protect the students under his/her care or supervision.

Further, siblings who have lost a brother or sister may have been impacted. It is not known if there is specific research or follows up on those who have lost a sibling to a school shooting.

Thirdly, teachers who have lost a fellow teacher may have been very traumatized by this event. One begins to wonder "Could this happen to me?" Both teachers and students no longer feel "safe" (one of Maslow's basic needs).

Fourth, students who may have been in another part of the school or another part of the building may also be impacted by the event. They may hear horror stories from their peers about the event, and may even experience nightmares regarding the event. They have to grieve, although they were not actually present at the event.

There are also "first responders" who may have their own issues. The Emergency Medical Personnel who arrive on the scene to encounter screaming and or bleeding children have to triage the situation quite quickly while also in some instances being afraid for themselves. Garner, Baker, and Hagelgans [12] have addressed some of the issues within an Adlerian framework, as first responders are not just responders, but are survivors of shootings, accidents, house fires and the like, and they too may suffer from PTSD, depression and trauma.

There is an additional need for training in helping others cope with post-traumatic stress disorders. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders- 5th Edition clearly delineates the diagnostic criteria, diagnostic features, and outlines prevalence, development and course, risk and prognostic factors, culture and gender-related issues and issues of suicidality. There is also a section on differential diagnosis and comorbidity.

In closing, we must also pay close attention to those who would perpetrate such traumatic events. Schools and mental health clinicians and police all need to pay much closer attention to those who may be suspected of being mentally ill or mentally challenged or having a Conduct Disorder. An ounce of prevention is certainly worth many hours of later intervention. We now have a long history of school shootings and at

least a preliminary understanding of these perpetrators. We need to be much more proactive and protect our students and our teachers from harm.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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