
VIRGINIA TECH: AFTER MATH OF TRAGEDY

Once you get through the initial days following a crisis, you may think the hard work is done. However, weekly, monthly and yearly anniversaries of the event can cause many issues to spring forward again.

BY NANCY BODENHORN, PH.D.; CARMELITA MOORE; MARCIA OBENSHAIN AND DANNY KNOTT

On April 16, 2007, the campus shootings at Virginia Tech affected not only those of us on campus and in Blacksburg, Va., but seemingly people across the country and around the world. Although it was a terrible tragedy that we wouldn't wish on anyone, it was comforting to see the outpouring of support and concern expressed by others.

Crises of this magnitude are, thankfully, rare; however, most school communities regularly experience some type of crisis, either ones affecting an individual or family or ones affecting a larger community. When these crises occur, school counselors are at the forefront of managing the situation, frequently in the form of personal or small-group consolation or community work to overcome fears and traumas.

Managing the immediate reactions is certainly important, but in many ways the harder work starts in the weeks, months and years to follow. This has certainly been the case in Blacksburg.

prayers, which came literally from around the world, meant to us in the aftermath of the tragedy.

As school counselors, we recognize that reminders to past events occur in a variety of places, through sensory intake and calendar markers. For some people, seeing a particular picture, hearing a particular sound or smelling a particular odor can "take us back" to previous powerful experiences, both positive and negative. These prompts frequently occur unpredictably and, therefore, are difficult to prepare for.

Anniversaries of traumatic events, however, are predictable, thereby allowing us to prepare. Anniversaries also evoke a re-emergence of the feelings and memories of traumatic events to a stronger degree than might be taking place regularly. This is referred to as the "anniversary effect." You see it with people who lost a loved one during the holiday season, making the holidays particularly painful for them for years. And the anniversary dates of

this is a common, although not automatic, effect. Consider planning preventive and healthy outlets for people to come together to commemorate their experiences.

A Proactive Stand

The Blacksburg community has been proactive with commemorations. During the first week after the shootings, we held a nationally televised convocation, community candlelight vigils and a community picnic on campus. The local K-12 schools weren't in session that week, which allowed families to spend time together and community members of all ages to participate as appropriate in the commemorations and memorial services.

During this time, school counselors from each strand (elementary and middle schools feeding into a common high school) in the county met to develop a plan of action for the days to follow. They distributed literature provided by ASCA, the American Counseling Association and other national counseling resources to students, staff and parents. One of the agreed-upon plans was for each strand to host a community evening at one of the schools, allowing community members to come for an evening of support and fellowship. This evening was scheduled for one week after the shootings, which was also the first day schools were back in session.

Both school counselors and a counselor from the community staffed each site. They provided individual and group grief counseling and disseminated information regarding the grief process, post-traumatic stress and self-care during times of tragedy. Ironically, no one attended the Blacksburg High School strand event, which may be an indication of overload for those in this particular community. However, the two hours the counselors spent together proved therapeutic in nature for those present.

This same Monday, April 23, was also the first day back to class for the Virginia Tech students and faculty. Through the efforts of the Virginia School Counselor Association, Virginia

ANNIVERSARIES OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS, HOWEVER, ARE PREDICTABLE, THEREBY ALLOWING US TO PREPARE.

The university, community agencies and the local schools have cooperated on a variety of efforts that have contributed to the resiliency throughout our community.

The four co-authors of this article work at the university and the three schools in Blacksburg that were most affected, by physical proximity as well as by students and staff who were related to primary victims of the shootings. We would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the schools, organizations and individuals throughout the country who sent supportive cards, e-mails, signs, banners, etc. We cannot express how much these words, thoughts, gifts and

family deaths are tender days for those affected. Frequently, a family will acknowledge or commemorate an anniversary of a death, similar to the way we acknowledge and celebrate anniversaries of marriages and births.

In the event of traumas affecting a relatively small group of people in the school (for example a club, team, staff or grade level) a preventive approach can be initiated by arranging a meeting with those most affected. At the very least you'll want to acknowledge the anniversary and alert teachers to the potential of increased fragile emotions. In the case of a community trauma, school counselors should be candid with staff, students and families that

Counselors Association and other professional organizations, a call went out to counselors and mental health providers within a two-hour radius of campus, and we received the gift of 300-plus counselors, including many school counselors, to provide support to the campus community. This effort lasted two days, so the classes that did not meet until Tuesday also received coverage. Each class with an injured or deceased student or faculty member was assigned a team of two counselors. Each academic building also had a team assigned, and teams were distributed to common gathering areas on campus. Faculty members had the option to request a team to talk with their classes if they were concerned about how to begin the classes, and many took advantage of this opportunity. We believe this might be the largest deployment of mental health providers in one area at one time.

In the local schools, all schools had extra counselors on hand either from other school systems or from the community so students and staff were able to talk with someone immediately if needed, and faculty and staff conference rooms were well-stocked with refreshments. The high school held an assembly on the first day returning to school. The middle school (in which four students had lost a parent in the shooting) met in their teams, which consist of 45-80 students with consistent teachers for the group. The initial advisory session, where students gathered for the first time, was extended for however long the team felt was appropriate and was staffed with extra administrators and counselors. The elementary schools met initially in their classrooms. Each setting used the strength of its structure and the student body's comfort level to guide their decisions about this process. During the first two weeks back at school, two Korean counselors were brought to Blacksburg. The shooter was of Korean descent, and although there were no reported repercussions to the Korean or Korean-American communities, there was some fear of reprisals. These counselors met with a variety of

Laurel Spring
1/3 square

Beacon
1/3 square

students both on campus and in the schools and with parents and counselors in the community.

Commemorative Events

For the VT campus community, graduation the next month was a major event and again was nationally televised. Once the university students dispersed across the country in mid-May, Blacksburg was able to intensify its internal focus. University faculty and employees had been focused on the students and planning for events in late April and early May. So for many of us the reality of the tragedy's impact didn't settle in until after graduation.

The K-12 schools were still in session and were actively working on the resilience of their students. In May, the local elementary school planted a "Hokie Hope" tree and orange daylilies on their grounds. Four fifth-grade students designed commemorative tiles, which are laid out at the foot

of the tree and among the daylilies, and the third-graders sang a special song. The mayor, school superintendent and other dignitaries attended. A fifth-grade student's father was killed on April 16, and the mother was in attendance at this important memorial for both the family as well as the broader community. The middle school also planted a "Hokie Hope" tree, which was ceremoniously dedicated by a student representative of each grade level. The eighth-grade student representative asked to speak and delivered a commemorative speech that brought students, teachers and administrators to tears.

At the six-month anniversary of the event, the university kicked off a community service effort titled "VT Engage." Two of the major contributors to this effort were the amazing and inspirational parents of one of the students who was killed. The student had been a keen and consistent volun-

teer and would most likely have entered a profession focused on public service. In an effort to honor her spirit, as well as the spirit and potential of all the students and faculty lost, university students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends were encouraged to pledge at least 10 hours of volunteer time to any community service agency, to be completed before the end of spring semester. That afternoon, the center of the Virginia Tech campus was filled with booths from local community agencies. Games were arranged for children of all ages; some local vendors provided free snacks, and the focus was on how all of us are connected to each other in support. The entire team of school counselors from the local high school was there staffing some of the game booths. Together with the VT students were high school groups, such as the National Honor Society, pledging time and energy in remembrance of the positive aspects of their lost friends.

National Univ Virtual
1/2 horizontal

As of this writing, well over 210,000 hours of volunteer time have been pledged through the VT Engage process, which will undoubtedly have a positive impact both on those people who provide the services as well as the recipients.

The local elementary school joined the VT Engage effort through a special project, "Caring Kipps Community," which will highlight community service hours completed by children, faculty, staff and families. At the high school, the National Honor Society established a memorial scholarship in honor of a 2006 graduate who was a victim of the shootings. One high school student who is an exemplary artist designed a print for sale; donations were used to support memorial endeavors in the community. The marketing classes are also donating hours of service to VT Engage through the Cinderella Project where they collect formalwear from area university stu-

dents to provide prom attire for high school students at no cost. At a staff level, many employees of the local high school, including the entire school counseling department, donated hours of service to the Montgomery County Christmas Store.

Moving Forward

One of the most common refrains heard during the days and weeks following the shootings was, "This event will not define us; our reaction to it will be what defines us." Virginia Tech's motto is "*Ut Prosim* – That I May Serve." The outpouring of support from the community is a direct reflection of this motto. The other important outcome from this tragedy is reflective of the word "crisis." It is important for school counselors to remember that the Chinese symbol for crisis incorporates two separate symbols: one meaning danger, the other meaning opportunity. Additionally, the

Greek etymology of the word crisis refers to a decision or turning point. There is obvious risk and sadness involved in a crisis event, but there is also the potential for growth. Indeed, similar to post-traumatic stress, the more common result is actually post-traumatic growth.

While we want to focus on the growth and positive reactions the majority of our community has managed, there is obviously still pain and stress involved. The Virginia Tech Counseling Center, which serves the VT students, and the New River Valley Community Service Board, which serves the wider community, have both reported a 25 percent–35 percent increase in referrals and requests for appointments since April 16, 2007.

This is also reflected in the K-12 schools, where countywide referrals to mental health services have increased over the past year. There appears to be

National Ground Water
1/2 horizontal

Hyalite
1/3 vertical

a higher level of stress and anxiety for students, either directly relating to April 16 or reflective of family stress. Students and families appear to be more aware of mental and emotional health and are seeking assistance more openly. The stigma of mental health needs in the school setting doesn't appear as great as it had been prior to

students, but the consensus was to offer awareness and support as needed but to try to keep as much normalcy and routine as possible. These events allowed the combined feelings of grief and anger, as well as the perspective of a year spent learning how to integrate this tragedy into our lives, to be recognized and honored. Although there are

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON REFRAINS HEARD DURING THE DAYS AND WEEKS FOLLOWING THE SHOOTINGS WAS, "THIS EVENT WILL NOT DEFINE US; OUR REACTION TO IT WILL BE WHAT DEFINES US."

April 16. We are fortunate in our area to have mandated elementary school counselors, a lower student-to-school-counselor ratio than the national average and arrangements with Community Services Board, Family Preservation Services and the Women's Resource Center, all of which provide additional counselors who are housed at the schools.

One Year Later

For the one-year anniversary on April 16, 2008, the university didn't have classes. A ceremony was held at the memorial site in the morning, and a candlelight vigil was held at the same site in the evening. The unstructured afternoon time allowed for various smaller groups on campus and in the community to meet and commemorate the tragedy in private and appropriate ways. The local schools were in session and planned a moment of silence and remembrance in the morning. They allowed particular groups or classes that were directly related to the victims to meet together. Counselors from the community were available for extra support in case the school counselors were overwhelmed with stu-

already some voices in the community that indicate a desire to stop talking about April 16, the Virginia Tech leaders seem to understand the need for continued planning and commemoration, even though it is painful. ☐

Nancy Bodenborn is an associate professor in counselor education at Virginia Tech; she can be reached at nanboden@vt.edu. Carmelita Moore is a school counselor at Blacksburg High School, Blacksburg, Va., and a doctoral candidate in counselor education at Virginia Tech. Marcia Obensbain is a school counselor at Kipps Elementary School in Blacksburg, and Danny Knott is principal at Blacksburg Middle School.