

Heeding Plans Of Violence

Perpetrators Don't Just Snap

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By GAIL A. HORNSTEIN

Dramatic acts of violence, like shootings at schools, offices, restaurants or gyms, are routinely called "mindless" or "senseless" in press reporting. But there is no such thing as a meaningless action; behavior always has a purpose, at least to the person who's doing it. Whether we actually want to pay attention to how disturbed people understand their own actions is another story.

The community near Columbine High School in Colorado learned this lesson in the most painful way possible in 1999. A decade of reflection and analysis has taught them a hard truth: There are no simple explanations of violence. Warning signs, however, often do exist, and not taking them seriously can be naive and dangerous.

Mary Ellen O'Toole, a senior researcher at the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, who authored the bureau's 2000 "Threat Assessment Report" on school violence after studying cases all across the country, says bluntly that school shooters have no standard "profile." They're not all loners or failing students or the victims of bullying. They cross all kinds of lines. But they have one thing in common: "Without exception," O'Toole says, "these kids will tell you what they are going to do beforehand."

Indeed, most of the people who committed highly publicized acts of violence over the past 10 years - at Columbine, Virginia Tech, Paducah High School in Kentucky, the American Civic Association in Binghamton, N.Y., and most recently at the LA Fitness club in Bridgeville, Pa. - left personal accounts of their planned actions in video blogs, suicide notes, letters or diaries.

We may find these people's motivations abhorrent and their thinking disturbing, but ignoring the insights they offer into their own behavior can keep us from understanding violence.

The widely held attitude that bizarre or frightening behavior is incomprehensible shapes our response to all sorts of extreme actions, not just violence. We act as though people

can just "crack up" without warning; that they don't plan their behavior or reflect on its consequences.

But that's not what happens. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold left diaries filled with detailed plans for the attack at Columbine. Michael Carneal, who killed three and wounded five of his classmates in West Paducah, Ky., made repeated threats, but both students and faculty thought he was joking. Jiverly Wong, the perpetrator of the mass shooting in Binghamton earlier this year, sent a long letter explaining his actions to a local TV station; press reports dismissed it as "rambling and disjointed."

George Sodini, this month's shooter in the suburban Pittsburgh area, offered a glimpse of his plans on a website.

Even deeply distressed people are motivated to try to make sense of their behavior and feelings, just as we all are.

Except for the tiny minority of violent acts that occur in alcoholic blackouts or "crimes of passion," all actions - even the most frightening ones - are planned, revised and described (at least privately) before they happen. As boundaries continue to blur between written notes, messages sent electronically, voicemail, Web postings, blogs, etc., we have even more chance to hear people's intentions and thwart them if necessary.

This is how J.P. Neufeld, a student at Concordia University in Montreal, helped to save the lives of people in a school 3,200 miles away. Reading a favorite website while eating breakfast early one morning, Neufeld noticed a posting by a 16-year-old boy who said he would attack his school in Norfolk, England, at noon that day "with arson and other forms of violence."

The posting was accompanied by a photo of some of the victims at Columbine. Neufeld and two others in England (who recognized the potential arsonist and could identify him), immediately called the Norfolk police, who were able to arrest the student as he approached the school armed with a knife, matches, and a "flammable liquid."

I'm not talking about interrogating every teenager who is boastful or angry. People let off steam or go through periods of despair or hopelessness without causing problems. But someone with a systematic plan to harm or kill people ought to be taken at his word. In suicide prevention programs, lesson one is to "ask if there's a plan." It's taken as axiomatic that detailed intentions precede action.

When people are filled with rage or desperation, we have to take seriously what they say. If we listened to them sooner, perhaps they wouldn't so often have to resort to violence.

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