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## Virginia Tech: Responses from University and College Counseling Centers

CCAPS Newsletter  
June 2007

The tragedy which transpired on April 16th, 2007, on the Virginia Tech campus reverberated throughout counseling centers, college campuses, and the world. A Virginia Tech student, Seung-Hui Cho, shot and killed 32 fellow students and faculty, and many others were injured. In the subsequent months, there has been much discussion about the safety of our campuses, the regulation of access to firearms, the laws regarding release of mental health information, and the xenophobic reactions of some to Mr. Cho's Korean heritage. Clearly, this is an incident that will exist in our collective consciousness for a long time, in multiple ways, and this article will not try to capture all the implications in their entirety. Rather, I will attempt to explore some of the reactions of counseling centers and counseling center professionals in the wake of this tragedy.



(Please note: Staff members from the Cook Counseling Center at Virginia Tech were unable to contribute to this article, due to the ongoing investigation on their campus.)

For many of us, our initial responses to hearing of the events of April 16th were multifaceted yet also similar. Jonathan Kandell, CCAPS Chair and Assistant Director at the University of Maryland, reported initially being "stunned and saddened that this would happen on a college campus." "Horried," said Bert Epstein, Director of the Psychological Counseling Services at California State — Sacramento. "The fact that this occurred on a college campus certainly gave me chills." Mark Harris, the Clinical Director at the University of Iowa, described "sadness, but not surprise" and concern for his Virginia Tech colleagues. "I hoped they had never had contact with the shooter. I could only imagine what it would feel like to be a therapist that had provided service to him."

We also responded uniquely based on our professional roles and the types of campuses in which we work. Cyndy Boyd, the Training Director at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), was concerned about trainees feeling additional responsibility to predict lethality in clients, and quickly clarified with them what was expected of trainees and the Counseling Center in general. Mary Beth Javorek, the Training Coordinator at John Carroll University, noted the active and visible role their center plays on their small campus, and her concerns at the time that the Counseling Center would be asked to be "experts in the moment" and "handle everything." At Iowa, where a similar shooting took place 16 years ago, Mark Harris was worried about re-traumatization for faculty and staff.

Our centers and professional groups also responded, with emotional and tangible supports. Volunteer counselors came from all over the country to assist the Virginia Tech community, making themselves available with armbands that read "May I help?"

Student affairs and mental health organizations issued statements of concern and support. In our counseling center position-related organizations such as ACCTA and AUCCCD, support was offered in particular to the Virginia Tech staff member that is a member of that organization, as well as to the staff as a whole. On our own campuses, many counseling centers offered individual and group services, consultation to faculty, staff, and administrators, and information via webpages and handouts.

A specific way that many counseling center staff members across the country were asked to respond to the Virginia Tech tragedy was via the media. Many of us were asked to respond to the legitimate but difficult questions such as "How could this happen?" and "Are we really safe on our campuses?" in our

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own local and campus media, and I will highlight two important examples of national media exposure here. First, Chris Flynn, the new Director at Virginia Tech, gave a moving and thoughtful television interview in which he expressed his own sorrow and horror, yet also made a point of characterizing Mr. Cho as troubled rather than evil. Bert Epstein served as the guest “speaker” in a live online discussion moderated by the Chronicle of Higher Education on April 18th. The discussion focused on models of crisis response and the best ways for counseling centers and colleges and universities to support their communities when tragedy occurs.

In addition to being part of the multiple efforts outlined above, as well as many others not discussed in this article, CCAPS members responded in several ways. First, similar to many of our other professional communities, there was much discussion on the CCAPS listserv about our own reactions to the shootings and how our centers would provide appropriate responses and services to our home campuses. CCAPS members also expressed concern for our colleagues at the Cook Counseling Center, and offered two specific efforts to support them: First, CCAPS members quickly offered themselves as support resources for the professional staff at Virginia Tech, recognizing a need to provide emotional support to those who were being asked to provide so much to that impacted community. In less than 48 hours after the shootings, a multipage document with names and contact information of those willing to help was provided to the staff of the Center. Also, CCAPS members gave monetarily and a gift card was purchased and presented to the Cook Counseling Center staff. The intention of this gift was to provide help with additional personal costs that might be incurred—for example, purchasing dinners on the nights when the Center staff were on campus until 9:00pm and later, providing service.

We are still certainly experiencing the ripple effect of the events of April 16th, 2007, and the complete impact will likely not be evident for several years. Many colleges and universities are actively reviewing existing crisis management policies, and some of us may begin the fall semester with new procedures, programs, and/or staff in place. There is active discussion on some campuses about performing “risk assessments” as the role of Counseling Centers in performing such assessments. One positive aftereffect, noted by many CCAPS members on our listserv, has been the opportunity to come together in a crisis and support our colleagues. Jonathan Kandell and others have described CCAPS and the Counseling Center community as a family, and it was truly heartening and gratifying to participate in the active demonstration of those personal and professional ties in the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings.



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