

Inside the Mind of Active Shooters in a School Environment

"What's past is prologue."

*-William Shakespeare
The Tempest*

There is a great deal of false information about active shooters in a school environment. There are those who will tell you these shootings are random, and therefore, unpredictable events. Often, the parents of active shooters, psychologists, school officials, law enforcement, and federal agencies such as the Homeland Security Department, will say little can be done to prevent school shootings.

This statement ignores the facts about active shooters in our schools and promotes a victim based mentality. It prevents any proactive intervention before a school shooting occurs by ignoring students at risk for extreme violence and eliminates opportunities to defuse a crisis before it escalates out of control.

Effective intervention for those at risk of becoming active shooters in a school environment begins with an understanding of what is going on inside the minds of active shooters and how they came to think in such a dysfunctional and violent way.

Let's look at the facts from the school shootings that have happened in the United States since 1990:

Almost all active shooters were male [99%] between the ages of 13 and 18 [97%]. [95%] will see themselves as isolated, wronged, bullied, angry, defiant or depressed. [93%] will have expressed intent to commit violence to others verbally or in notes or letters or in posts on social media often weeks, months and even years before they become active shooters.

More than 80% of all active shooters in a school environment will be on antidepressants [SSRI's or MAOI's] or attempting to withdraw from the use of these drugs at the time they decide to kill. We know this from parents, fellow students, law enforcement reports, and from toxicology reports of active shooters at time of autopsy. The use of SSRI's and MAOI's among school shooters may actually be much higher. Securing non-disclosure agreements in legal settlements with parents and victims after school shootings are a top priority of lawyers working for the pharmaceutical companies who produce SSRI's and MAOI's.

Many active shooters display obsession with firearms and death. Active shooters who survive the event will consistently say they thought they had no other option than to use extreme violence in their situation.

An Act of Power By Someone Who Sees Themselves As Otherwise Powerless

One way to understand what is going on in the minds of a most active shooters is to look at their behavior as an act of power by someone who sees themselves as otherwise powerless. Active Shooters did not arrive at this place in their lives overnight. Realizing this gives parents, fellow students, teachers, school counselors, and administrators opportunities to access and effectively intervene before the student's behavior reaches a critical mass and violence results. Review of active shooting events in a school environment over the last 30 years demonstrates a clear, well established pattern of warning signs [predictive indicators] of extreme violence.

Missed Warning Signs, Red Flags, and the Effects of Denial and Cognitive Dissonance in Active Shooting Events

*"The most dangerous ideas...are not the ones being argued,
but the ones that are assumed."*

-C. S. Lewis

School shootings are extremely powerful, emotional events. The thought of a school shooting is almost unbearable to a rational person. Yet choosing to ignore the warning signs present in school shooters is in itself, irrational. People avoid rational thinking relating to active shooting events primarily through cognitive dissonance and denial.

Cognitive dissonance is the mental conflict which results when personal beliefs are contradicted by offending information. This tension is relieved by rejecting the offending information, rationalizing the information as invalid, or simply denying contrary information exists.

For good or ill, the Columbine High School shooting on April 20, 1999 has become the watershed event of school shootings in the United States, with 14 killed and another 21 wounded. But Columbine should not be considered the Sine qua non of active shooters or school shootings.

The popular narrative of the Columbine shooters presented by the media, the parents of the active shooters, school officials, and local law enforcement is misleading and self serving. These two active shooters were not bullied by jocks and shunned by the popular students producing their resentment, anger and rage and causing them to commit mass murder. The truth of why they killed is both more reassuring and at the same time more frightening than the commonly accepted conclusions about why they became active shooters.

Sadly, denial and cognitive dissonance present in many key individuals caught up in the tragedy have obscured, confused and misdirected efforts to understand the real lessons of the Columbine shootings.

The Depressive and the Psychopath

To understand why Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold became active shooters, it is necessary to understand how they became active shooters. It was not until three months after the terrible carnage at Columbine these details began to emerge at a summit on school violence in Leesburg, Virginia.

Renowned mental health experts, including psychiatrist Frank Ochberg, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Dwayne Fuselier, also a clinical psychologist, concluded this school shooting was a means to a much grander end. It was a way to shock and terrorize the entire nation by attacking a primary symbol of American life. While their killing was aimed at students and teachers, it was not driven by resentment. The students and teachers were just convenient prey.

Harris [the psychopath] and Klebold [the depressive] had actually made fun of “*typical school shooters*” boasting they could slaughter more people than the Oklahoma City bombing. They had originally planned the Columbine massacre on its anniversary. Klebold bragged about inflicting “*the most deaths in U.S. history.*” The Columbine massacre was intended to be a school bombing on a massive and horrible scale.

Harris and Klebold only planned on shooting those survivors who were able to flee the school after their bombs exploded. Had they not been so incompetent at making detonating devices for their bombs which they had prepositioned in the school cafeteria, the death toll would have been much higher. As many as 600 people might have died from the bomb blasts alone. They had also placed explosives in their cars timed to explode when the police, fire and rescue workers arrived on the scene. They expected all this to be captured on live television.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were radically different individuals with very different motives and opposite mental conditions but united with a common goal. Klebold is easier to understand. He was impulsive and easily angered but was clearly depressive and suicidal. Klebold blamed himself for his problems.

Harris is the challenge. He was innocent looking and well-spoken. Some students, parents, and teachers described him as charming or even a nice young man. But others would see a cold, calculating and homicidal side. While Klebold would hate himself, Harris hated everyone around him. Klebold was hurting inside, while Harris wanted to hurt people. Harris was not just a disturbed teenager, he was a psychopath.

“Psychopaths are not disoriented or out of touch with reality, nor do they experience the delusions, hallucinations, or intense subjective distress that characterize most other mental disorders,” writes Dr. Robert Hare, in Without Conscience, the seminal book on the condition. Dr. Hare is also one of the psychologists consulted by the FBI about Columbine. Dr. Hare goes on to say “Unlike psychotic individuals, psychopaths are rational and aware of what they are doing and why. Their behavior is the result of choice, freely exercised.”

Understanding Harris as a psychopath tells us a great deal about his thought process. A thought process which enabled him to commit mass murder and manipulate Klebold to join him. Harris, like all psychopaths, was extremely deceitful, highly manipulative, lacking empathy and remorse, and saw others as objects for his own use.

“Their vision was to create a nightmare so devastating and apocalyptic that the entire world would shudder at their power.”



Sue Klebold with Dylan Klebold age 5

Sue Klebold is the mother of Dylan Klebold. Even today, she is adamant.

“There were no clues, nothing to indicate my son would do something like this... we didn't know that he and Eric had assembled an arsenal of explosives and guns. We believed his participation in the massacre was accidental or that he had been coerced. We believed he did not intend to hurt anyone. We were sure Dylan had been tricked at the last minute into using live ammunition. None of us could accept he was capable of doing what he did.”

Wayne and Kathy Harris, parents of Eric Harris also say *“we never had any reason, any clue, nothing to believe our son could do this... it was just not something we saw in him.”*

The truth is there were very serious behavior problems with Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold long before the tragedy of Columbine. These warning signs and red flags [predictive indicators] were clear and well established.

These predictive indicators had been escalating in number and severity for years before the massacre and were known to many parents, fellow students, teachers, school administrators, school resource officers and the local sheriffs department. Columbine students, parents and teachers have described numerous instances of Harris and Klebold's frightening behavior, acts of rage, and specific, carefully detailed death threats.

Here are a few examples:

A year and a half before the Columbine tragedy, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were arrested for smashing the windows of a van and stealing equipment from inside the vehicle. Both were placed on probation.

In 1998, Devon Adams, a sophomore at Columbine High school, found her name [along with the names of other students] on Eric Harris' website on a *"hit list"* of people to be murdered. She told an assistant principal at Columbine who did nothing. Brook Brown, another student, saw his name on Harris' website with a specific threat to murder him. He saw that Eric was writing about making bombs and talking about mass killings.

"Eric was saying how he was gonna blow people up. He wrote 'Hey, I'm making pipe bombs. I've got the designs for bombs on my website. I'm gonna kill these people.'"

Brook and his parents, Randy and Judy Brown, went to the Jefferson County Sheriff Department about these threats. In the aftermath of the Columbine shootings, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department would deny meeting with the Browns. The Sheriff's Department later would admit they had worked on a warrant to search Eric Harris' home. In 2004 a sheriff department document came to light showing deputies had found a pipe bomb in the Harris home which was consistent with the devices Harris described making on his website.

"I was utterly dumbfounded they did nothing with [the specific threats to kill their son] or the Harris's threats to kill others with bombs he said he was making on his web pages."

After meetings with the Browns, sheriff's deputies decided to warn school administrators at Columbine that Eric Harris *"might be making pipe bombs"*. But according to a school official, Sally Blanchard, *"the school had no reason to look into the matter further."*

Another student, Nate Dykeman, says Harris and Klebold were showing off their weapons to students months before the Columbine shooting. Dykeman told Sheriff's deputies that Harris also showed him a pipe bomb and video tapes they made shooting guns and planning to kill people. According to Dykeman, Harris and Klebold played the tapes for students and teachers more than a year before the massacre.

In February of 1999, two months before the Columbine shootings, Klebold wrote a chilling narrative as a school assignment about an assassin in a black trench coat who shoots down school students and then decides to bomb a city.

"The man unloaded one of the pistols across the front of four innocents," Klebold said. "The...streetlights caused a visible reflection off of the droplets of blood...I understood his actions..."

Klebold's teacher called it *"the most vicious story she'd ever read,"* and went to Klebold's parents and to school counselors. The Klebolds defended their son's assignment and school officials decided to not look into the matter any further.

The parents of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold have consistently maintained they had no idea their sons were amassing knives, multiple guns, thousands of rounds of ammunition, cans of gunpowder, several coils of bomb fuse assembled more over 100 improvised explosive devices, pipe bombs, propane tank bombs and homemade grenades and stored them in their bedrooms.

At night, as their parents slept soundly in the same house, Harris and Klebold would make video tapes discussing their plans to commit mass murder. Eric Harris can be heard on the tapes saying,

"If only... [my parents] had checked my room. If only... [my parents] had asked more questions."

The Horror and Loss of School Shootings **is So Terrible That We Must Learn From Them**

“God allows us to experience the low points of life in order to teach us lessons that we could learn in no other way.”

-C. S. Lewis

The active shooting event at Columbine High School has little in common with the majority of “typical” school shootings. Yet Harris and Klebold, for all their grand plans of mass carnage, presented the same warning signs of extreme violent behavior we find in other active shooters in a school environment.

The most important lesson we can learn from the terrible carnage at Columbine High School is that active shooters, in a school environment, will exhibit predictive behaviors well before an active shooting event.

Concerned parents, teachers, school administrators and law enforcement officials prepared with the training and knowledge to recognize these predictive behaviors can intervene and literally stop a student with these indicators from becoming an active shooter at their school.