

THE TABER SCHOOL SHOOTING: CRISIS VERSUS TRAUMATIC EVENT

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Originally Published in:

The Canadian Psychological Association's Psynopsis (Short version)

The Canadian Journal of Emergency Management (Long version)

The Taber School Shooting: Crisis Versus Traumatic Event The terms crisis and traumatic event are often used interchangeably. In Taber we had dealt with many crises as a response team, but we had not dealt with a traumatic event until two students were gunned down in the hallway of W.R. Myers High School. We did not consider the difference between these phenomena until we experienced it ourselves and were left to make on-the-spot adjustments to our protocol that would have been better to address during the calm of pre-incident planning. Without a clear differentiation of terms, our crises had felt like traumatic events until we were exposed to what turned out to be a qualitatively different experience: an in-school shooting. Our experience suggests that delineating the factors that differentiate a crisis from a traumatic event may provide other crisis response teams with information that could help them be prepared to deal with their own traumatic events. Presented here are two distinctions between crises and traumatic events that became apparent to us in assessing our experience, that is, differences in magnitude and differences in expectedness of the event.

Differences in Magnitude

Number of People Affected

One difference in magnitude we experienced was the number of people who were seriously affected by the school shooting. There were so many local people affected during the traumatic event that it was difficult to determine where the team personnel were most needed. Two years before the tragic shooting at W.R. Myers, the Taber Suicide Intervention Committee (TSIC) began work on developing a formal school protocol for crisis responding. Since that time, the Taber Crisis Response Team, an adjunct of TSIC, has used the protocol on several occasions. Every time the team has been called out new lessons have been learned and incorporated into the team's evolving understanding of the theory and practice of crisis responding. This understanding has enabled us to work with school personnel to successfully predict who would be most likely to be seriously affected psychologically by crisis situations such as accidental death and suicide. The early identification of possible high risk students has made it possible for us to provide collateral services of crisis intervention counseling to students already in crisis, and Critical Incident Stress Debriefing - type (CISD) groups for students not currently in a serious state of disequilibrium.

This predictability factor was the foundation for our ability to respond effectively and efficiently in crisis situations prior to the school shooting in Taber. When the shooting occurred our predictive capacity diminished. Determining people at risk psychologically was made difficult by the many levels of trauma that were involved with this traumatic event. That is, so great was the impact of this kind of situation

that our ability to predict who would be the most psychologically affected was seriously impeded. Although there were only a few primary victims, everyone else in the school and community were potential victims as well. Indeed, symptoms even developed in individuals who were not connected, in any direct way, to the incident or its primary victims. The result of this extended level of emotional intensity and disequilibrium meant that our crisis team of approximately twelve members was not adequate to meet the need at W.R. Myers High School.

Personnel Needed

This extended level of psychological impact resulted in another area of magnitude difference: the number of personnel that were needed to deal with the situation. It appears that one of the simplest ways to distinguish a crisis from a traumatic event comes when a community's resources are not able to meet the need. In Taber, external police, counseling and crisis responding services were required. As the crisis response team leader during the Taber incident, I immediately requested additional support from other local colleagues and doubled the size of our original team. This traumatic event, however, required more assistance than that. Although our numbers on site at the high school were adequate, it quickly became apparent that other schools in the region were also experiencing varying degrees of a trauma response and required the assistance of crisis response teams as well. Approximately fifty other professionals and paraprofessionals were organized to respond to other schools to which our team would have normally responded had the incident been a crisis.

Other than the Taber Crisis Response Team, the additional teams called in to assist were usually not organized teams following a given protocol, but were rapidly organized groups of helpers with varying professional backgrounds who had often not met each other until minutes before providing services. Schools outside of W.R. Myers recognized that the familiar local team could not be provided under the circumstances, but these schools appeared to respond best when someone known came to their assistance. In one instance a former Taber school counselor offered his services and I immediately appointed him to lead a team in a nearby elementary school where he was known; his very presence reportedly decreased staff and student anxiety substantially. This need for additional personnel brought up a related issue that as a team we had not discussed before the shooting and therefore had to deal with during the traumatic event. This was, due to the magnitude of a traumatic event, does one transfer leadership to what may be a more experienced outside team?

Local Teams Versus Outside Experts

This issue of whether or not outside teams should be brought into an area to be in charge of services, often centers around objectivity and emotional functionality of local members. Specifically, are they too emotionally involved to be effective? Many groups, teams and professionals offered to provide services specifically for W.R. Myers High School and although I absorbed several additional counselors and therapists into the Taber Crisis Response Team (they were all known by me or a team member), I did not transfer leadership. Our thinking at the time was that schools would prefer to not access teams with which they were not well acquainted. Of course, team members who would have a clear dual relationship with individuals directly linked with an event would not participate with the team for that incident, but all other members would proceed as usual.

In Taber we were known to the school staff and students. They were familiar with

our protocol. Two years previous to the shooting incident all school administrators and selected staff from each school had spent a day training with our crisis response team. During this day we explained and demonstrated to the participants what a crisis response would look like. From the beginning of our existence as a team we have never entered a school unless the administrator has invited us. When we are invited, administration clearly knows the service they are requesting. School personnel become an appendage of our team and we become an appendage of theirs, as we collaborate on identifying students at risk, and prepare for the implementation of the crisis protocol.

We believe we have been effective in previous crisis situations and were effective during the traumatic event. It is our position that trained local teams are the most effective, but during traumatic events they are also the most affected. This doesn't mean local teams necessarily become incapacitated after traumas, but it does mean that the magnitude of the event results in a greater emotional/physical expenditure by local team members than it would if they were from the outside. For rural communities the trade-off for preferred service may be diminished follow-up counseling services for a time while local teams are recovering (especially if teams consist of primarily counselors and therapists, as was the case in Taber). This belief that communities prefer local teams has been backed up anecdotally by communications with other professionals involved in similar traumatic situations.

A result of my role as team leader in the Taber incident is the open lines of communication that now exist between myself and several colleagues throughout the United States whose communities have likewise been affected by school shootings. From these communications, it is apparent that local teams and local individual helping professionals were more readily accepted by school staff and students and therefore perceived to be more effective than when "outside" service providers were utilized. This was not an issue of competence. In some cases even though outside teams were clearly expert crisis responders, schools were resistant to them. It may be that the school is perceived, second only to home, as a place of safety for our children and murder in such a setting is more of a personal and private matter. Thus there is a desire to keep things "in the family" as it were.

As we deal with the aftermath of the shooting we are continuing to assess the consequences of our leadership decision through debriefing and formal and informal conversations. Many of the positive (e.g., greater acceptance by schools) and negative consequences (e.g., toll on team members) were immediately apparent. Others are just emerging, such as, what would our role be like in the aftermath if we had given up control during the traumatic event? Who would deal with the aftershocks that we are now experiencing? As we continue to gather information, it becomes clear that there are many questions pertaining to the leadership issue to which there are not easy answers. Even if an outside team obviously has more expertise and experience, it appears that whether or not leadership should be handed over to them remains a complicated issue. This issue has become even more intricate as we begin to realize that through our experience we are now being viewed as some of the provincial specialists on handling traumatic events.

Amount of Information

Another important consequence of the amount of people seriously affected by the shooting incident as well as the breadth of public interest in the event was the significant amount of information that had to be dealt with. During a crisis the team leader is usually able to manage the flow of information quite easily regarding

possible high-risk students, the developing facts of the situation, and assignments to team members. Should the team leader be unable to continue their leadership role, another experienced team member could easily assume leadership. After being designated as the team leader, the magnitude of the effect of the shooting quickly became apparent and for the first time in the history of the Taber Crisis Response Team a co-leader was appointed to assist. Trying to coordinate the tremendous flow of critical information became a full-time job and by the end of the day, I often had two to three tables covered in pieces of torn paper, stickies and formal message notepads. To have passed on the volumes of information in my memory and crudely organized on those tables would have been impossible. Had I not been able to continue as team leader, my co-leader would have inherited an organizational disaster; the work was simply too complicated to easily communicate verbally everything I knew to my co-leader. I discovered it is essential that during a traumatic event the team leader have a log book with names, numbers, decisions made and issues pending; a log book we now recognize should have been prepared before hand

Differences in Expectedness

Why is it that although there were only a few primary victims in the Taber incident, so many people were seriously affected? We believe the issue of expectedness appears to be a major contributing factor to the magnitude of a traumatic event. For the purpose of this article, expectedness is considered to be based on a continuum from low expectedness to high expectedness. High expectedness is the perception of individuals or communities that an event could happen and low expectedness is the perception of individuals or communities that an event could not happen. For an event to be traumatic, a large portion of the community must have perceived the incident as having a lower expectedness. The events that occurred in Taber were generally unexpected. We expect car accidents to happen, it is the identity of the victim(s) that has low expectedness. We expect suicides and terminal illness, but prior to April 28, 1999, we did not expect a fourteen year old boy would gun down two innocent students in the hallway of one of our schools.

Differences in expectedness of a crisis versus a traumatic event such as the shooting in Taber may be directly linked to the components making up a traumatic event: although each component may vary in the degree of expectedness, if the sum total of components is a lower expectedness, then the event may be experienced as a traumatic event. Here each component could be viewed as an aspect of the trauma that had moderate to low expectedness. In Taber, these components would be a) one youth was seriously injured, b) the second youth died, c) an act of violence caused the injury and death, d) the act of violence was random, e) the alleged perpetrator was a youth himself, f) the shooting occurred in what was viewed as the safety of a school, g) the shooting occurred less than a week after school shootings in Littleton, Colorado, h) the shooting occurred in a Canadian school, and i) the media coverage was intense.

The components noted above are not exhaustive but are believed to be key aspects of why this incident was so traumatic from an expectedness viewpoint. If a continuum with a score of 1 for the lowest level of expectedness for each component and 10 for the highest is utilized, one can see how a cumulation of components with lower expectedness could be viewed as traumatic. For example, components four through nine, as noted above, may have only resulted in a 1 or 2 on the expectedness continuum. Components one through three may have been experienced by the community as having an expectedness of between 4 and 6, yet

the sum total of these components would still be in the low expectedness range (i.e., nine components with scores of 4, 4, 6, 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 2 = 22 divided by nine = a cumulative score of 2.4). Hypothetically, a cumulative score of 3 or lower would more likely be experienced as a traumatic event. Two of the components, beyond the alleged murder and attempted murder, that seemed dominant were the setting of the shooting (i.e., school) and the intense media coverage. Assuming individual components vary in weight, these two are felt to have added significantly to the overall trauma response.

Most would agree that the location of the shooting incident in Taber was directly linked to its unexpectedness. A young man gunned down in the back alley behind the bar is not a traumatic event, because we expect that type of setting to result in violence from time to time. However, the shedding of innocent blood within the walls of a safe and caring school is a traumatic event and an unfathomable breach of Canadian morality. This unexpectedness also means the event is more likely to be focused upon by the media. The back alley murder is perhaps newsworthy locally for a few days and nationally for a day, but a school shooting in Canada has sustainability as news both nationally and internationally. This sustainability was illustrated when four months after the shooting, many media personnel again descended upon W.R. Myers High School to report on the first day back to school in a new school year.

We did not expect the media to descend upon our town as rapidly as it did and with the volume of personnel associated with it. We did not expect that what was perceived in Canada as a uniquely American event (school shootings) could become a Canadian experience. Tragic as any violent death is, the shooting in Taber was also unpredictable and unexpected. The media was able to capture this experience and broadcast it to millions of viewers thereby actively extending the impact of the event. In addition, many community members regretted things they said to reporters, or images of a devastated self that was captured by cameras and broadcast to the world to see. Thus, even the local psychological impact of the event was added to by the media. The intense media involvement then would appear to be not only a key component contributing to the unexpectedness of the event locally, but also, reciprocally, was as intense as it was because of the unexpectedness of the event itself.

A similar circular relationship is also apparent between the magnitude of the event and its expectedness. The number of people affected locally were a result of the unexpectedness of the event, but the number of people affected also contributed to its unexpectedness. In all of this the media played an important role. Besides being a key local component contributing to the unexpectedness of the event, it also contributed to the magnitude of the event. The media affected the magnitude of the event locally due to the psychological impact of the media's invasiveness and intensiveness, and more globally, via the media's mass exposure of the details of the event and its victims to the nation and beyond.

Conclusion

Our experiences with the shooting in Taber has left the Taber Crisis Response Team with a better understanding of traumatic events at both a practical and a philosophical level. On one hand, we are more aware of decisions and material that could have been in place a priori. On the other hand, we are more aware of two distinctions between crises and traumatic events: the magnitude and expectedness of the event, and how these factors interact with each other. In addition, we have a better understanding of the key role the media plays in both of these factors.

Why are school shootings such traumatic events? We have said it is because of the magnitude of the event and the very low expectedness of the event. Thus, according to our present reasoning, should school shootings continue to occur, the day may come when they are perceived as having a higher expectedness and consequently would seriously affect only individuals connected in a direct way with the event. Then, a shooting incident like that in Taber might easily be handled by a team of twelve, as what was once a traumatic event may instead be experienced as just another crisis.

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