

*Long version of an L.A. Times editorial written after the Aurora, Colorado shootings*

## Murders are Frightening in Mental Health Too

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Murderers are frightening. Mental illness is frightening. Mentally ill murderers are frightening. When we're frightened we look for explanations; reasons so sense and safety can be restored to our world. In some ways it's almost reassuring to find out that a murderer is mentally ill. That makes sense to us. They wouldn't have done this terrible thing if they weren't crazy. Now we can go along with our standard line of bemoaning the lack of mental health services, outreach, and involuntary commitment abilities. We have something to blame and something that should be done so it won't happen again. The problem we're told is negligence, not rare, frightening violence.

Except that this doesn't really add up either. I'm a psychiatrist who has spent my life working with thousands of people with mental illnesses and murder is no more sensible in my world than in yours, and it's still just as frightening. Murder is just as unpredictable, extraordinarily rare, and shocking with mental illness as without it. I should know. Twenty-three years ago my closest friend at work, a social worker, Robbyn Pannitch was murdered by a homeless man with schizophrenia she was trying to help. Shocking. Traumatizing. Unpredictable. And extraordinarily rare. In the 50 years of Los Angeles' Department of Mental Health there have been thousands of employees and hundreds of thousands of clients. As far as I know, Robbyn is the only staff murdered. But that doesn't make it any better or any less frightening. My friend is still dead.

What can we do to cope with our fear? It doesn't really help to know that statistically people with mental illness are no more likely than anyone else to be violent or that they're more likely to be victims than perpetrators. It doesn't really help to know that it only seems like there's an epidemic of murder because our media is so effective at linking billions of us together so we're all impacted by even stunningly rare events. It doesn't help to know that much of the linkage between violence and mental illness is merely fabricated for dramatic effect – Steve Lopez was never physically attacked by Nathaniel Ayers. Patch Adam's wife wasn't murdered by a psychotic man they reached out to. It doesn't even help to know that we've created lots of new mental health programs in California using Proposition 63/Mental Health Services Act moneys that are reaching out and helping thousands of people even while our system, like everyone else, is crippled by the economy and budget cuts.

Mental health professionals should help heal in times of grief. We should help bring families and communities together. The question really shouldn't be, "How will we make sure this never happens again?" We can't answer that. It will happen again. We will be frightened and traumatized again. The question should be, "How will we have the strength and resilience to heal and go on together?" While others are looking for vengeance and justice, we should be promoting acceptance and forgiveness, community and healing. This isn't the time to exploit tragedy to lobby for more money. It's the time to pitch in and bring people together.

Mental illness or not, the healthiest approach to dealing with overwhelming violence and fear is the one we teach to rape victims: “You can never be truly safe. None of us can. You don’t have to be reckless and you can take precautions, but you might be attacked again anyway. If you hide away and don’t go on with life and don’t do the things you love, you will have let the rapist and the fear win.” When we’re a little calmer, it is reasonable to ask whether our current funding levels for mental health or our current gun laws or our current mental health services on college campuses are reckless or not, but keep in mind that even taking better precautions won’t make us truly safe.

We built glass walls and metal detectors and hired security guards at our mental health clinics after Robbyn died. Those aren’t really precautions. They’re just barriers. They’re not making us any safer or any less frightened and they are getting in the way of doing the work we love. They were giving into the fear. We don’t need police and metal detectors to go to the movies either.

When we’re frightened, our natural response is to hunker down, hide away, and build walls around ourselves. We feel the need to reassure ourselves that we can separate ourselves from the danger: There was something unusual in the circumstances that would’ve tipped me off, or there was some negligence, or someone with a mental illness should’ve been locked up and wasn’t. The problem with this kind of thinking is that it we can never really feel safe while we’re hiding alone. Since we’re still frightened we obsess about building higher walls and more barriers. Let’s get more security staff in the airport, more scanners, more gun control, and more locked hospitals for people with mental illnesses, more jails and prisons. No matter how much more we do we’re still frightened.

The way to actually be safer and less frightened is not to separate and hide; it’s to reach out to each other and take care of each other. Remember how right after September 11 and Hurricane Katarina we reached out to each other, prayed for each other, gave practical help and sympathy to each other – before the fear mongers took over? That’s what actually works.

If we don’t go see Batman or the next blockbuster movie premier, or if we don’t let the next “loner” into college, or if I hadn’t returned to working with psychotic, homeless people, we’re giving into our fears instead of facing them and learning to live with them. We can make it through this together.