

Sports Medicine Response to the Virginia Tech Shootings: Lessons Learned

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Following the anniversary of the Virginia Tech shootings, the lead members of the Sports Medicine Team gathered to conduct a review and analysis of the events and of their response. The resulting report is organized into four sections: Shock and Recovery, the Leader-Helpers Dilemma, Milestones, and Perspectives on Lessons Learned.

Appendices at the conclusion of the report include: (A) A description of the process by which the report was created; (B); A summary of a related lessons learned report prepared by psychological responders at the local Montgomery Regional Hospital; and, (C) A document prepared by Mike Goforth in the immediate aftermath of the events.

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SHOCK & RECOVERY

An initial period of shock was followed in quick succession by recovery efforts. This period began at first notice of the shootings, continued through the first year, and is ongoing.

The Sports Medicine Team self-report suggests a personal acute stress response.

Shock

Signs of shock and acute stress response were prominent: including: an initial reaction of disbelief, memory disruption, sleep disturbance, sense of time distortion, intense emotional response.

Memory Disruption

Report of memory disruption was most prominent on the day of the shootings, and continued less significantly through the following days. Some memories are strongly engrained and vivid, while for other periods of time there is no continuous memory.

For example: One author reports a phone conversation with another author which the second author does not remember.

Sleep disturbance

Difficulty sleeping was a common response in the immediate aftermath.

Sense of time distortion.

The time between the shootings and the memorial service, the next day seems longer than the actual time interval.

Emotional Response

Cycling of potent emotions- loss, helplessness, anger, fear.

Emotions did not occur in a logical orderly progression but were more reactive - typically triggered by response to contemporaneous events.

Frequency and intensity of emotional response was greatest the first hours, significant through the first days, and is ongoing

The authors reported a reluctance to leave the campus on the first day, and a sense of emptiness in the days that followed.

Recovery

Recovery is defined to mean recovering emotional equilibrium and a sense of normalcy in day-to-day activities.

Recovery began with attempts to take action, although initial efforts were frustrated by various logistical and practical obstacles.

The Memorial service held at the University the next day moved the recovery process forward with particular notice given to the comments of poet, Nikki Giovanni.

Recovery was facilitated by the outpouring of support from many quarters within and outside the university -- from friends, rivals, and those without prior association with VT. Within the University in general, the collegiate athletic community in particular, and the surrounding community, there was a pervasive sense of support and a reaffirmation of a shared role and purpose.

Response over Time

The emotional impact of the event and process of recovery has been protracted and is ongoing.

One author reports continuing to experience a strong emotional response when driving by the Norris Hall classroom building (scene of the second of the shootings) for a full year after.

The behavior of those outside the greater VT community in response to the tragedy initially evoked strong feelings, both positive and negative. These reactions continued, albeit with diminishing intensity and frequency, through the following year and beyond.

Efforts by others to use the event for a personal agenda evoked the strongest negative response.

Media behavior was seen as extraordinarily negative from the outset, and continued to be a negative factor evoking strong feelings.

One author reports a sense of personal pride in the ability of the student body as a whole (through repeated interviews) to maintain composure and a sense of dignity, despite what appears to be repeated efforts of the media to sow seeds of dissent.

Some rival schools renewed recruiting efforts with student-athletes who had already committed to VT.

Initial support from others was positive and nearly overwhelming. This continued in many ways throughout the following year.

One author reports finding it easier to get special medical procedures approved for student-athletes.

One author reports receiving special travel accommodations when an airline gate agent became aware of his affiliation with VT.

Rival sports programs offered strong and varied support in general, with some notable exceptions.

Revisiting of the experience, through this exercise was visibly emotionally evocative.

The severity of traumatic response was worsened by the scale and reach of the tragedy.

One author reported that there was no place in his life that seemed outside the immediate reach of the tragedy -- with impact felt by family members, church community etc.

The reach of the tragedy and its impact on student-athletes makes it a sport related trauma and marks it as unique among sports-related tragedies.

This led the authors to rethink their assumptions about what constitutes a sport related trauma - from an event which occurs on the playing field to one which has a significant impact on athlete well being. Correspondingly, they have broadened the role they feel they should play in athlete well being.

THE LEADER/HELPERS' DILEMMA

Sports Medicine Team consists of members of helping professions who simultaneously function in leadership roles within the athletic program. This dual set of responsibilities defines their particular roles within the University environment.

Concern over status of loved ones and close personal associates quickly gave way to a broader sense of responsibility for the well being of student-athletes, and with this, efforts to fulfill established roles as helpers and leaders.

Initial efforts to function in established roles were limited by varied logistical barriers and pragmatic constraints

Logistical obstacles (e.g., information & access) were most significant in the first hours, One author was stopped by police coming from the athletic department on the way to teach class and secluded with a group of students in a secure location, with limited ability to use a phone due to circuit overload.

A second author attempted to go to campus from his medical office but was turned away at security barricades.

The realization that business could not go on as usual over the next days challenged the leader-helpers to redefine their roles for this specific situation. In making decisions about moving forward, they needed to balance respect for dead and care for the living.

Redefine Role

Because customary routines were interrupted for all, and because student-athletes' needs were different at that the time, the day-to-day role and function of the leader-helpers needed to change in response.

Effective reengagement follows from rethinking and redefining roles.

“Head down, feet moving”

The intensely felt need to “do something” seemed to precede and to drive the redefining of roles. This was conveyed in the words of one author as “head down, feet moving.”

This response helped move the authors through the logistical chaos and intense emotion of the first hours.

Mike Gorth started to gather information about the event and similar events- creating a sense of context and meaning. This was assembled into a power point presentation and shared with colleagues within and outside the university. This was met with a positive response calling attention to the importance of gathering and sharing information.

Noteworthy was the inclusion of four categories of trauma that have an impact on student-athletes: “Sports Related Deaths” (on the field of play); “Non-Athletic Related Deaths” (athlete fatalities “off” the field of play); “School Deaths” (trauma related multiple student deaths); and “Community Events” (e.g., Hurricane Katrina).

The full document is available in Appendix C.

Gunnar Brolinson independently created a series of power point slides memorializing the event to share with his VCOM colleagues out of town at the meeting of the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine, for them to share in turn with their professional colleagues.

Redefining Role

Two prominent strategies governed efforts to re-establish role, which are described below as “going deeper” and “going wider”

“Going deeper” – Looking past the typical day-to-day functions to core values: primarily, student-athlete welfare.

This perspective served to ground the leader-helper, and provided a sense of direction while addressing any of the diverse situations.

“Going wider” – The extraordinary nature of the event presented constraints, but also presented opportunities to provide service as a helper and leader.

Because of the reach of the event, there was literally an opportunity to help wherever people were gathered. Thus simply being open to ways to help in whatever the setting was important.

This perspective facilitated spontaneous response, like a “read & react” function

Some examples

One author is a faculty member of the closely affiliated, Edward Via Virginia College of Osteopathic Medicine (VCOM). By coincidence a guest lecturer the next day was presenting to medical students on gun shot wounds to the brain. Several students expressed concern about the topic leaving the lecture to seek out members of the VCOM leadership team. The author politely interrupted the lecture, sat with the assembled students, discussed the event, their needs and the role they might play in response to the tragedy, as well as other tragedies that they may experience in their future medical careers. Their desire was to be present at the hospital to assist, but this was deferred because the hospital was well staffed. The students were dismissed for the remainder of the day to be with family and friends.

Football coach, Frank Beamer was seen frequently at sports events.

Coach Beamer is the most prominent person in the Athletic Department and by extension a prominent member of the University -- and is therefore a de facto leader. While it is not his role to be present at sports events, he chose to do so providing much appreciated support to the athletic program. Beamer also visited the hospitalized students although none were student-athletes.

Respect the Dead – Care for the Living

These two simultaneous and compelling challenges would drive decision making for the athletic department about moving forward.

Suspension of usual events is an implicit sign of respect in times of tragedy. This provides those suffering loss to deal with grief, as they benefit from the support of others, and work to re-establish emotional equilibrium.

Taking a philosophic perspective, one author described sport as a microcosm of human experience, providing an arena within which any of life’s dramas can be played out, and offering an opportunity for both memorializing and celebrating the positive.

Both philosophic and practical perspectives suggested that sport could have an important role in the recovery process for student-athletes, as well as, the University community.

The key question was when and how should practices resume and games continue?

Rationale

A pragmatic rationale for resuming practice was embraced.

Student-Athletes

A sports team is a natural support group based on existing relationships and common sense of purpose. Sports practice provides an opportunity for the group to be together and experience a sense of support and security. The practice itself is a stress reliever, countering the psychophysiology of stress (which drives symptoms like those reported by the authors).

University Community

Sports events present a positive context for bringing the student body and the larger VT community together.

That sports events could play a significant role in the recovery process was assumed in advance and confirmed in retrospect.

TURNING POINTS

The First Sport Event: Baseball Beginning to Move Forward

The Men's Baseball Team played on Friday evening (4 days after the shootings).

The authors felt that the opportunity to play a game gave more meaning and focus to practice, and helped the student-athletes move forward.

Prior to the game a baseball was placed at the memorial sites for each of those that had died in the shootings.

About 4,000 people attended the event, far in excess of the typical numbers in attendance

The National anthem was described as followed by a "deep silence."

The upbeat nature of the social environment that surrounded the game, led one author to describe the event as the beginning of return to normalcy.

VT performed well against a superior opponent, creating positive energy in the crowd

Ironically, the game ending play was an exceptional catch by a Miami outfielder on a hit that would have tied the game

While the way the game ended deflated the energy of the crowd, the authors described the event as a good game, as something that was appreciated on its own, independent of the final score.

They shared the perception that this helped bring the athletic program back on track as other sports events followed as scheduled over the weekend.

In retrospect, the event was seen as striking a sensible balance between memorializing the dead and moving forward.

The First Football Game A National Memorial

A major college football game is both an athletic event and a festival, bringing the University community together in larger numbers than any other campus event. As such it is a suitable platform for bringing attention to issues that lay close to the heart of the community; and in this case, served as a natural opportunity for memorializing.

The University Community

The memorializing was a national experience – by being nationally televised and by its meaning to those many nationwide who were touched by the tragedy.

ESPN Game Day was hosted at VT. There was an extraordinary degree of media attention throughout the preceding week, much of which focused on the football team.

The opponent, East Carolina University, donated to the Hokie Spirit Memorial Fund, offering a sense of alliance with their opponent.

The players wore memorial armbands. The names of the deceased were carried onto the field in the team “lunch pail” – a conspicuous symbol of the values to which the football team aspires.

The event began with a memorializing of those that died, then shifted to usual pre-game activities generating the excitement that typically characterizes a major college football game. This transition was described as feeling like an emotional rollercoaster by the author who experienced the event from the stands.

One author reported feeling bad for East Carolina given the overwhelming national support for VT on that day.

The Football Team

The football team was thus faced with the complex, simultaneous challenge of hosting a memorial service and playing a football game.

From a philosophic and emotional perspective, it appears that there were many implicit and typically poorly articulated expectations projected on the team to do something more than play a football game.

In the immediate aftermath of the shootings, a decision was made to cancel the spring football game out of respect for the dead and grieving. This disrupted the mechanics of the end of the year close-out with the football team. This had a direct impact on preseason planning, and making the start to the new season more challenging from a practical perspective

The football team struggled through a win over what was perceived a relatively weak opponent.

In retrospect, this event was also seen as striking a reasonable balance between memorializing and celebration. This setting allowed the larger sport and national communities to join with the University in memorializing the tragedy and in moving forward.

VT Baseball vs. The New York Yankees Bringing Closure

The New York Yankees played a memorial game with the VT Baseball team, bringing their marquee players. The Yankees' organization also donated \$1 million dollars to the Hokie Spirit Memorial Fund.

While a memorial event, it carried more the feeling of a simple celebration of life.

Coming about one year later, it functioned as a fitting close to the sports season, the academic cycle, and the period of mourning.

After this game the armbands that had been worn for the season were retired

This served as one more conspicuous step toward moving forward.

PERSPECTIVES on LESSONS LEARNED

The VT shootings lead the Sports Medicine Group to pause and reassess personal perspectives and professional practices.

The year following the shootings was one of the most successful in the history of Virginia Tech Athletics. Commentary about this follows at the end of this section.

Philosophic

Power of Information & Communication

The information void that followed the shootings was a cause of great angst as all waited and worried, fearing the worst.

Information, whether good or bad, was important and valued. Good news offered a sense of relief, while bad news defined what needed to be done to address the welfare of others. The value of information was reinforced in a positive way by the appreciation shown by colleagues, friends and associates for information that was provided to them.

One author began gathering information in the first hours, assembling this into a power point which was forwarded to associates within the University and within the ACC Sport Community

A second author, in similar fashion, gathered and distributed information to the leadership of VCOM, who were out of town at a conference, enabling the Medical Schools leadership to be an effective spokesperson within their professional association.

One author suggested: "Tell people what you know and tell them what you don't know, but be sure to communicate"

Renewed Appreciation of Sport

Great tragedy often triggers a questioning of values, driving a personal inventory of values, meaning and purpose. Often this search brings those who suffer tragedies back in touch with core values.

Collegiate sports competition is conspicuously value driven with sports teams serving as the standard bearers of the University's values. These values are displayed on the field of play, and provide a means for assessing performance over and above outcome.

In the face of tragedy, sport provided an opportunity to refocus on the positive for the athletes, and as a context for bringing the student body together.

The shared bond of sport enabled competing teams to transcend personal rivalries and evoked significant support from many in the sports world.

Student-Athletes

Team meetings and sports practices served as a natural support mechanism. Resumptions of workouts provided health benefits, restoring psychological and physiological homeostasis.

University Community

Sports events provided a context for bringing the student body together, serving a social purpose. In that sports showcase mental and physical prowess, they celebrate the best of the human condition.

Action Response

Communication

Baseball was the only team with a quick communication system in place. This allowed the coaches and players to communicate in a timely fashion with each other, reducing the anxious and fearful period of unknown that followed the shootings, and facilitating the first steps of support and recovery.

The University Teams have since established a better internal communication system which has brought multiple benefits.

Crisis Management

The Athletic Department had an established sport trauma intervention plan focused on injuries on the playing field. This plan has since been expanded to address any crisis that would have a significant impact on student-athletes whether occurring on or off the field. While driven by the impact of the shootings, the rationale for this planning follows from the realization that the crises which occur off the field are more frequent and varied, represent a significant threat to the well being of student athletes, and therefore merit specific planning and preparation.

Mass Casualty Training

VCOM which has close ties with VT and the local community had conducted yearly mass casualty response simulations. The training following the shootings was expanded and approached with renewed vigor and sense of purpose.

A Banner Year for VT Athletics

The year following the shootings was one of the most successful ever for VT. This provided some reassurance that the impact of the trauma was resolving, while evoking question as to the underlying causes of this success.

One author stated “everyone in Athletics was trying harder” – which was felt as a renewed sense of commitment that reached into the small details of day-to-day behavior. There was also a renewed sense of appreciation for the opportunity that sport provided.

The authors shared the perception that the athletic program showed a reinvigorated focus on core values –as individuals, as teams, and as representatives of the University. One author presented the central idea as “We represent the ‘Hokie Nation’” – which by extension implied a reaffirmation of the values of the University, and a focus on keeping these values in the forefront of consciousness.

APPENDIX A

Methodology

The strategy guiding the development of the report follows the Lessons Learned Systems approach described by Weber, Aha, & Becerra-Fernandez (2001), which includes five components: (1) Collection of the lesson; (2) Validating or verifying the accuracy of the lesson; (3) Storing the lesson; (4) Disseminating the Lesson; and (5) Reusing the Lesson.

The method for “collecting” and “validating” the lesson combines qualitative research methodology with an interactive group process. Participants were guided through a semi-structured interview as a guide to recalling and recounting their personal experience and professional response to the VT shootings. Responses were noted by the interviewer, organized by theme, and assimilated into a working document -- which was subsequently reviewed and revised to create this report. The technical report, *Psychological Intervention with the Virginia Tech Shootings: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for the Hospital Setting*, summarized in Appendix C, follows a similar method.

Reference

Weber, R., Aha, D. W., Becerra-Fernandez, I. (2001). Intelligent Lessons Learned Systems. *International Journal of Expert Systems-Research & Applications*, 20, 17-34.

APPENDIX B

Psychological Intervention with the Virginia Tech Shootings: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for the Hospital Setting

This report details lessons learned in psychological intervention at Montgomery Regional Hospital in providing service to injured members of the Virginia Tech community and their families, hospital staff and first responders

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The response by mental health counselors to the April 16, 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech is worth reviewing by those who study similar mass crises or may face them, especially in college communities. The authors provided services at Montgomery Regional Hospital to victims and their loved ones and to hospital staff and affiliates. Subsequently, they initiated a lessons-learned analysis. The impressions summarized here form the page report, "Psychological Intervention with the Virginia Tech Shootings: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for the Hospital Setting," which can be downloaded from <www.PsychHealthRoanoke.com/fyi.html> .

<> **Sanctuary: Emotional restoration began with finding a safe haven**

Administrators at Montgomery Regional Hospital set apart a section of their institution for the use of victims' displaced friends and loved ones. This provided multiple benefits.

<> **Information: Prompt, accurate information was precious**

Information allayed fears and enabled coping. The report describes communications providing aid and comfort to victims and their loved ones. Rumors and broadcasts filled voids with ready answers, sometimes insensitive, other times countertherapeutic or even traumatizing. While laws and policies have good reasons to limit official networks' release of information, this was problematic in the mass-trauma setting.

<> **Boundaries: Some media behavior was inappropriate**

The public relies on the mass media. However, some non-local broadcast media representatives interfered with hospital staff, serving their news organizations by

adversarial, aggressive intrusion requiring vigilant resistance. This sapped energies needed elsewhere. Media behavior angered many in the community.

<> Imagery: Most commonly visual, this had potent effects both in trauma and in therapy

Intrusive recollection characterizes traumatic stress disorders. Visiting the survivors, an innovative solution, allayed first responders' and medical providers' traumatizing images of damaged victims. Contrariwise, exposure to the perpetrator's recorded communications, aired by the media, further traumatized some.

<> Alliances: Mental health providers benefited from partnerships with other professionals

Quickly formed partnerships were needed to direct the response, flexibly and without territoriality. Both opportunistic and well meaning partners appeared, needing to be vetted for optimal assistance.

<> Caretaker Needs: Some helpers needed help afterwards

The hospital staff's mindset included the expectation that crisis counseling generally would be sought as needed, with participation encouraged, but with individual choice respected.

<> Resolution: Framing what happened

Ultimate coping required coming to terms with the doer and the deed, with the burden of having borne witness to the event, and with impact of the event on the sense of community.