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School Shootings: Who to Listen to Instead of Mainstream Shrinks



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I have never spoken with a school shooter, but I've talked with many teenage boys and young men who—though behaviorally nonviolent themselves—emotionally connect with the anger, alienation, and hopelessness of school shooters.

Regardless of whether they received poor or excellent grades, these teenage boys and young men all tell me that high school was an oppressive experience. When we talk about Trump's support for arming school teachers, they make caustic remarks such as: "Prison experts have long known that it's a bad idea for prison guards to carry guns."

Cynical about virtually all societal institutions, these young people tell me that NRA leaders care only about the NRA and gun profits and couldn't care less about them. And they have no hope that gutless politicians' gun control laws will decrease school shootings.

These teenage boys and young men are acutely sensitive to the variety of ways adults try to coerce compliance, and they dislike both self-identified "conservatives" and "liberals." For these young people, conservatives' religion and militarized society and liberals' schools and shrinks are different faces of the same oppressive box.

Especially cynical about mental health treatment, these young people all know emotionally troubled peers for whom mental health treatments were unhelpful, in some cases resulting in troubled kids becoming scary ones. Some of these young men whom I talk with know the details of the lives of well-known school shooters who had undergone treatment prior to their massacres—for example, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, whose school shooting in 1999 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado resulted in 15 dead (including themselves) and many others severely injured.

In 1998, Eric and Dylan, following their arrest for theft and in exchange for expunging their criminal records, agreed to diversion programs that included anger management. In *Columbine: A True Crime Story*, journalist Jeff Kass concluded, "In fact the diversion program itself, meant to soothe and rectify Eric and Dylan, probably prodded them towards Columbine as they chafed against the strict guidelines and boiled inside for being caught."

Eric was sent to a one-day program called "Violence is Preventable," and on December 1, 1998 (approximately five months before the Columbine massacre), he turned in his essay, telling authorities what he knew they wanted to hear: "The anger management class I took was helpful in many ways. . . . I believe the most valuable part of this class was thinking up ideas for ways to control anger and for ways to release stress in a non-violent manner. Things such as writing, taking a walk, talking, lifting weights, listening to different music, and exercising are all good ways to vent anger."

Eric Harris is now viewed as a "sociopath" by many of my mental health professional colleagues, but one young man who knows the case well told me, "Eric just got carried away with his übermensch nonsense. I've gotten carried away with my own nonsense, my self-destructive nonsense. We all can get carried away with our nonsense." Many of my mental health professional colleagues routinely get carried away with their diagnosis and treatment nonsense.

In addition to anger management, Eric Harris was treated with antidepressants. After his death, the coroner discovered that his bloodstream [contained the antidepressant Luvox.](#) Little publicized, Solvay, the manufacturer of Luvox, [reported](#) that in a ten-week trial, 4 percent of youth being treated with Luvox experienced “manic reactions” (compared with no such reactions in a control group treated with a placebo). Even the American Psychiatric Association, [admitted](#) in its 1994 DSM-IV: “Symptoms like those seen in a Manic Episode may be due to the direct effects of antidepressant medication.”

Psychiatric drugs—similar to alcohol and illegal psychotropic drugs—are for some people disinhibitors to violence, enabling violent thoughts to become violent actions. No medications are easier to “score” from a doctor than antidepressants, a class of drugs which doctors have been informed by their drug representatives as to present little risk. Doctors routinely prescribe psychiatric drugs in ten-minute “medication management” sessions, in which there is no time to discover just how pained their patients are; and so there is routinely little caution about prescribing a potentially violence-disinhibiting drug to an extremely world-hating or self-loathing young man.

For 14-year-old James “Austin” Hancock, it was the ADHD amphetamine Adderall that—along with feeling uncared about by his parents and easy access to a gun—resulted in his school shooting. In 2016, when at Madison Junior/Senior High, about 30 miles north of Cincinnati, Ohio, where I reside, Austin shot two students, with two others injured in the incident. Fortunately, all survived, and Austin’s story, [“A School Shooter, in His Own Words: ‘I Wasn’t Wanted by Anyone’](#),” was reported by Keith BieryGolick in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* earlier this year.

Not long after Austin was born, his parents separated and divorced. Austin recounted, “I’d go to my mom’s house and she has three other kids, so I felt like I wasn’t wanted there. And then I’d go back to my dad’s house and they have two kids, but they seem like they always focus all their time with them.” He lived with his father, who Austin said, “told me a few times before that he hated me and that he wished I . . . wasn’t his son.” Shortly before the shooting, Austin was grounded because of bad grades, and he also discovered that his girlfriend was cheating on him. Austin impulsively stole a gun from his great-grandmother but stated that he had no plan of using it; however, he was afraid the stolen gun would be found by his stepmother and this would cause him further troubles at home; so he took it to school. Austin had no intention of using the gun to shoot his classmates, but Adderall distorted his thinking.

At age 6, Austin was first medicated with Vyvanse (lisdexamfetamine dimesylate), a psychostimulant used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; and then, at age 11, was switched to Adderall. By the time he was 13, Austin would save up his Adderall and take several at a time. He recounted: “I’d just use it to get rid of my feelings. But really after the medicine went away, I would just feel worse. . . . I just wanted to get high off of it, I guess, just to relieve all these things—like, all these emotions that I was feeling. . . . But the Adderall seemed like it was messing with my emotions somehow, like just made me angrier and more depressed.”

The night before his school shooting, Austin reports that he took several Adderall pills. At school, he showed off the gun to a friend. Austin later recounted, “I just had a gut feeling he was going to tell someone, so I started getting really anxious and didn’t know what to do. . . . I could see my buddy whisper to some girl that I had the gun, and she started panicking. And on top of that I had took Adderall the night before, the Adderall that I had saved up, and it had carried into that morning . . . that really boosted my anxiety. . . she started panicking and running and ran to the office, and from then it just felt like I blacked out and that’s when everything happened. It just seemed like everything went blurred.”

The teenage boys and young men whom I speak with tell me that they have no hope that school shootings will decrease because all they hear in the news are authorities’ ideas about how better to control them. These young people tell me that they are angered by compulsory mental health screenings and “zero tolerance” for an insensitive joke told in school, and so they are certain that the effect on kids with greater potential for violence could be disastrous.

These young men don’t reject all adults, as they very much respect adults who “get it” about their world, especially those adults who hate coercion as much as they do. So, it’s been my experience that all of these young men respect Matt Stone and Trey Parker, creators of *South Park*. Matt Stone grew up in Littleton, Colorado, and went to Heritage High School (Columbine’s cross-town sports rival) about a decade before the Columbine massacre.

Stone, in a clip (from the film *Bowling for Columbine*) that these young people resonate with, [states](#): “I remember being in 6th grade, and I had to take the math test to get into Honors Math in 7th grade. And they’re like, ‘Don’t screw this up. Because if you screw this up, you won’t get into Honors Math in 7th grade.’ And of course if you don’t get into Honors Math in 7th grade, you won’t get into Honors Math in 8th grade. . . and then not in 9th grade and 10th grade and 11th grade and then you’ll just die poor and lonely. . . . A lot

of it is kids, but the teachers and counselors and principals don't help things. They scare you into conforming and doing good in school by saying: 'If you're a loser now, you're going to be a loser forever.' So that with Eric and Dylan—right?—people called them 'fag.' They're like, 'You know what? If I'm a fag now, I'm a fag forever.' And you wish someone just could have grabbed them, and gone, 'Dude, high school's not the end' They just beat it in your head as early as 6th grade: 'Don't fuck up, because if you do, you're going to die poor and lonely.' And you don't want to do that. And you're, like, 'Fuck, whatever I am now, I'm that forever.'”

The young people whom I talk with spend a great deal of time on the Internet, where a few of them have discovered Noam Chomsky, and they resonate to his contempt for coercion. [Chomsky talks](#) about going to Central High School in Philadelphia, a highly regarded school, but one he hated, “It was the dumbest, most ridiculous place I've ever been, it was like falling into a black hole or something. For one thing, it was extremely competitive—because that's one of the best ways of controlling people. So everybody was ranked, and you always knew exactly where you were. . . . All of this stuff is put into people's heads in various ways in the schools—that you got to beat down the person next to you, and just look out for yourself.”

If adults don't have some anger about their schooling experience, they will be unable to connect with these young people. Chomsky has some anger: “Like you're told by some stupid teacher, 'Do this,' which you know makes no sense whatsoever, but you do it, and if you do it you get to the next rung, and then you obey the next order, and finally you work your way through and they give you your letters: an awful lot of education is like that. . . . Some people go along with it because they figure, 'Okay, I'll do any stupid thing that asshole says because I want to get ahead'; others do it because they've just internalized the values. . . . But you do it, or else you're out: you ask too many questions and you're going to get in trouble. Now, there are also people who *don't* go along—and they're called 'behavior problems,' or 'unmotivated,' or things like that.”

Psychologist James Garbarino, in his well-researched 1999 book [Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them](#), concludes that “when boys kill, they are seeking justice—as they see it, through their eyes.” They often come to feel like a burden to their parents, an irritation for their teachers, and a pariah among their peers. They become hopeless that their overwhelming pain will ever end, and this is a major fuel for their violence against themselves and/or others.

Not only from their teachers and principals in their school lives and from their parents and stepparents in their family lives, but also from peer shaming in their Internet lives, these young people have learned that society is generally an uncaring place in which there are predators and prey, exploiters and the exploited, oppressors and the oppressed. They are often hopeless that there is a path besides being a victimizer or a victim.

I have no antidote for young people's hopelessness about U.S. society, but there can be an antidote to hopelessness about their personal lives—a mutually respectful and affectionate relationship with a nonviolent person. If they connect with an adult who has experienced overwhelming pain but who has come to live a more joyful life, they can acquire hope that their own pain may not be permanent. Some troubled young people are so distrusting of adults that they will never risk such a relationship, however, some will take the risk.

Such a healing relationship begins with an adult emotionally connecting with a young person's anger, alienation, and hopelessness. Unfortunately, teachers, principals, politicians, police, psychiatrists, psychologists, parents, and other authorities are socialized to the idea that being an authority for young people means denying anger, alienation, and hopelessness. So, from them, young people experience lectures that—even on their Adderall—do not compel attention; and they receive questioning that—even on their antidepressants—feels like torturous interrogations.

While not all troubled young people can be reached, some can be. However, adults who deny anger, alienation, and hopelessness give themselves no chance of connecting. And without a connection, there is no genuine dialogue. And without such a dialogue, all of us—especially angry, alienated, and hopeless young people—can get carried away with our nonsense.