

# THREAT ASSESSMENT: A Mental Health and Neuropsychological Perspective

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# Functions of a School Threat Assessment

- Identification of a potential perpetrator (school based inquiry/investigation)
- Assessment of the risk posed by a given perpetrator at a given time (District Level team evaluation/investigation)
- Management of the situation (both the subject and the risks that he/she presents to a given target) (school team in collaboration with district team).

(Fein, R. and Vossekuil, B, 2002)

# The Role of Law Enforcement

Traditional activities: apprehending and prosecuting perpetrators of violence

- Determining whether a crime has been committed
- Conducting an investigation to identify and apprehend the perpetrator
- Gathering evidence to assist the prosecutor in a criminal case

# What a Law Enforcement Officer Brings to the Threat Assessment Team

Identifies whether a crime has been committed

- Determine whether a student can be arrested
- Access to information (criminal history, etc.)
- Determines type and scope of investigation and how it should be broadened
- Conducts ongoing investigation which aids in focusing the assessment process
- A natural skepticism
- Safety, Safety, Safety!

# Typical Role of a “Mental Health Professional”

- Who is a mental health professional?

# Typical Role of a “Mental Health Professional”

- Knowledge of social/emotional issues affecting students
- Knowledge of interventions that can be implemented in a school setting
- Knowledge of General Education and Special Education
- Ability to describe/interpret social/emotional behavior in terms relevant to other team members, aid in synthesis information and documentation throughout the stages in the threat assessment process
- Develop rapport/professional relationships with the student, the student’s friends, and with relevant school staff

# Typical Role of a “Mental Health Professional”

- Ability to identify social/emotional/behavioral issues that may be pertinent to a threat assessment
- Can speak to a student’s current mental health status
- Knowledge of an array of mental health assessment options and interventions strategies
- Knowledge of community mental health resources

# Typical Role of a “Mental Health Professional”

- Help determine need for emergency mental health intervention and help coordinate emotional support in and out of school
- Aid the team in understanding the nature, cause and meaning of a student’s behavior and cognitions
- Identify the need for and type of clinical evaluations to aid in determining risk

# Information From a Mental Health Assessment for Threat Determination

- Helping the team understand the way psychopathology, mental health disorders, cognitive disorders may be contributing to a student's behavior
- The relative impact of environmental factors on the current situation
- Information about the level of interventions and/or supervision a student may need

# Information From a Mental Health Assessment for Threat Determination


- Diagnosis of serious mental illness
- Psychopathy
- Delusions
- Hallucinations
- Perseverative violent thoughts

# Types of Aggression/Violence

- Reactive: emotionally-based response to a provocation or “perceived” threat that can be immediate and/or impulsive
- Targeted: violence directed against a specific target that results from a planning process
- Threat assessment is designed to assess students at risk for both of these types of violence.

# Types of Aggression/Violence

- Different approaches to violence imply different cognitive, emotional, behavioral and psychological processes
- It is necessary to understand these differences in order to effectively conduct a threat assessment and to effectively intervene with the individual



There is no single cause of violence, nor a specific path in an individual's life that leads to violence

*“Violence is a result of an accumulation of individual and contextual risk factors that interact in a unique way and are differentially weighted in any individual case.”*

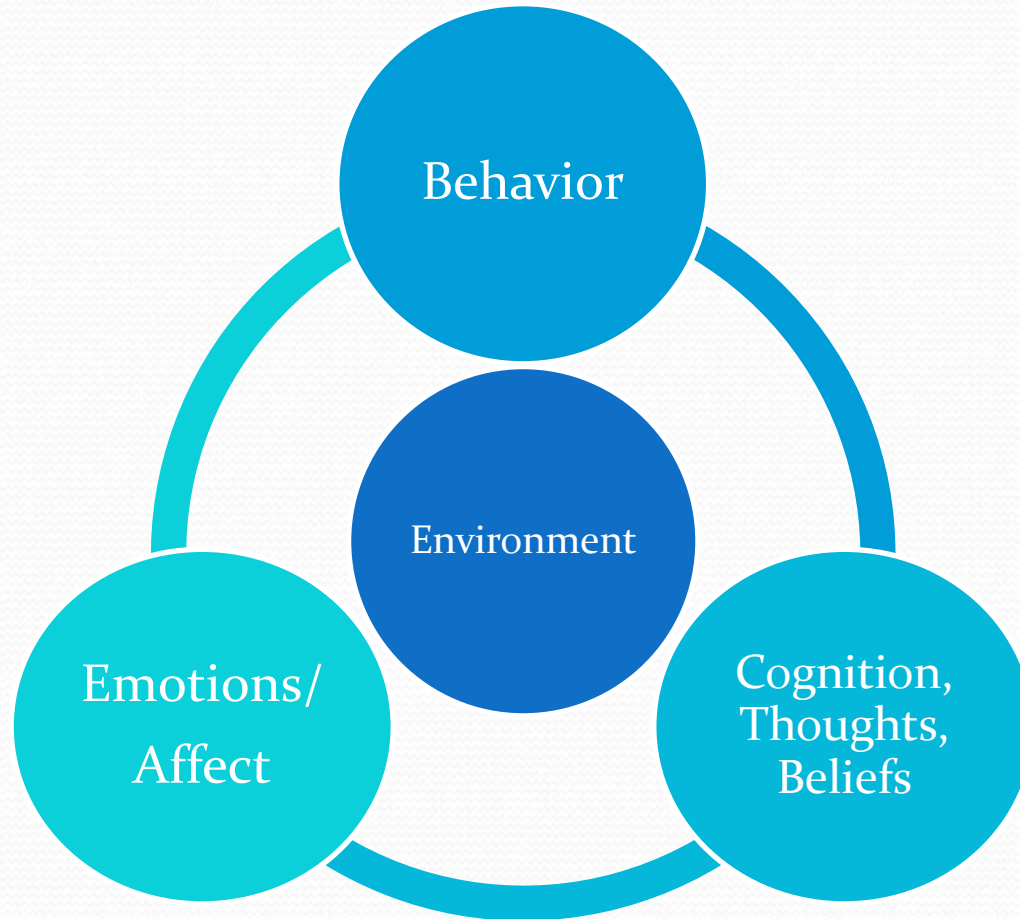
(Monahan et al, 2001)

# Violence is a Process

Violence: the result of the interaction among multiple factors:

- The individual
- The immediate circumstances
- The setting
- The long-term history

# A Cognitive Behavioral Model of Threat Assessment



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# Assessment of Risk vs. Threat

## Risk Assessment

- Goal is to predict future behavior
- Person may already be in custody
- Before an action is taken (release, parole) a risk assessment is initiated
- Situation is typically static

## Threat Assessment

- Goal is to prevent harm to targeted person/institution
- Not likely formal custody
- Some action to ensure safety may be taken before threat assessment is completed
- Situation is dynamic

# Influence of Substance Abuse

- Alcohol/drugs lowers inhibition and impairs judgment in conflict situations
- Look for descriptions of how the person behaves under the influence of alcohol/drugs
- Alcohol and drug use are associated with violence risk
- Alcohol/drugs can both mask and exacerbate other risk factors

# Influence of Substance Abuse

## Stimulants

- Can create grandiosity and paranoia
- Can create a physical sense of readiness to act
- Stopping the use of stimulants can result in depression

# What we have learned from post-analysis of school/campus violence

- Usually a traceable history of problems, conflicts and failures, both social and academic
- Attackers perceive violence to be a valid means of righting a perceived wrong
- Can be premeditated or opportunistic
- Instances of targeted violence involve planning, preparation and rehearsal before engaging in a violent attack
- Threat of discipline is not a deterrent to a person who desires revenge
- Many of the attackers demonstrated interest in violence through video games, movies, and other media
- Most attackers had no history of prior violent or criminal behavior

# What We Have Learned From Post-Analysis of School/Campus Violence

- Demonstration of a developing process of thinking and behavior that is oriented towards a violent attack
- Threat assessment in part focuses on a student's behavior and communication
- Individuals do not typically “snap”

# The Concept of “Leakage”

- Other students, siblings or parents are typically concerned in some way
- When students know about plans they rarely communicate this to adults in authority
- Lack of response to a threat can be interpreted as permission to proceed
- Most attackers act alone, but others can be involved in some way

# Why You Should Not Necessarily Wait For An Overt Threat Before Conducting a Threat Assessment

- Targeted school violence is rarely an impulsive act
- Most attackers don't threaten their victims directly
- Most attackers engage in behavior that is of concern, or an indication of a need for help

# Threat Assessment vs. Profiling

- Assessment of Risk for Violence does not use a prediction based approach, but a risk management strategy.
- Profiling is an appraisal of static predictors leading to a statement of probability of a specific violent outcome
- Threat Assessment is a weighted multidisciplinary appraisal of specific risk factors

# Key Characteristics of the Threat Assessment Process

- Focuses on the facts of a perceived threatening situation
- Examines the cognitions and behavior of the student over time to see if there is a progression on the continuum toward violence
- Corroborates information from multiple sources

# Pinpointing Behaviors of Concern

- Atypical or abrupt changes in behaviors or routines
- Extreme reaction to a real or perceived loss or to a traumatic event
- Preoccupation with weapons, violent events or persons who have engaged in violent actions
- Uncharacteristically poor school performance
- Referencing to harming self or others
- Referencing planning a violent action or destructive event

# Pinpointing Behaviors of Concern

- Evidence of depression, hopelessness, or suicidal thoughts and/or plans
- Inappropriate responses such as prolonged irritability, angry outbursts, or intense reactions
- Strained interpersonal relationships, isolating behaviors, or low self esteem
- Significant changes in life circumstances, such as loss of a relationship, membership, school suspension/expulsion

# What Data the Threat Assessment Team Should Look For

- The perceived motivation for the behavior
- Communication about ideas and intention
- Atypical interest in violence
- Attack related behavior and planning
- Mental status of the individual
- Level of sophistication to formulate and execute a plan of attack
- Evidence of recent or perceived loss
- Concern of others about the potential for harm
- Factors that may increase or decrease likelihood of violent attack

# Questions For a Threat Assessment Team to Consider

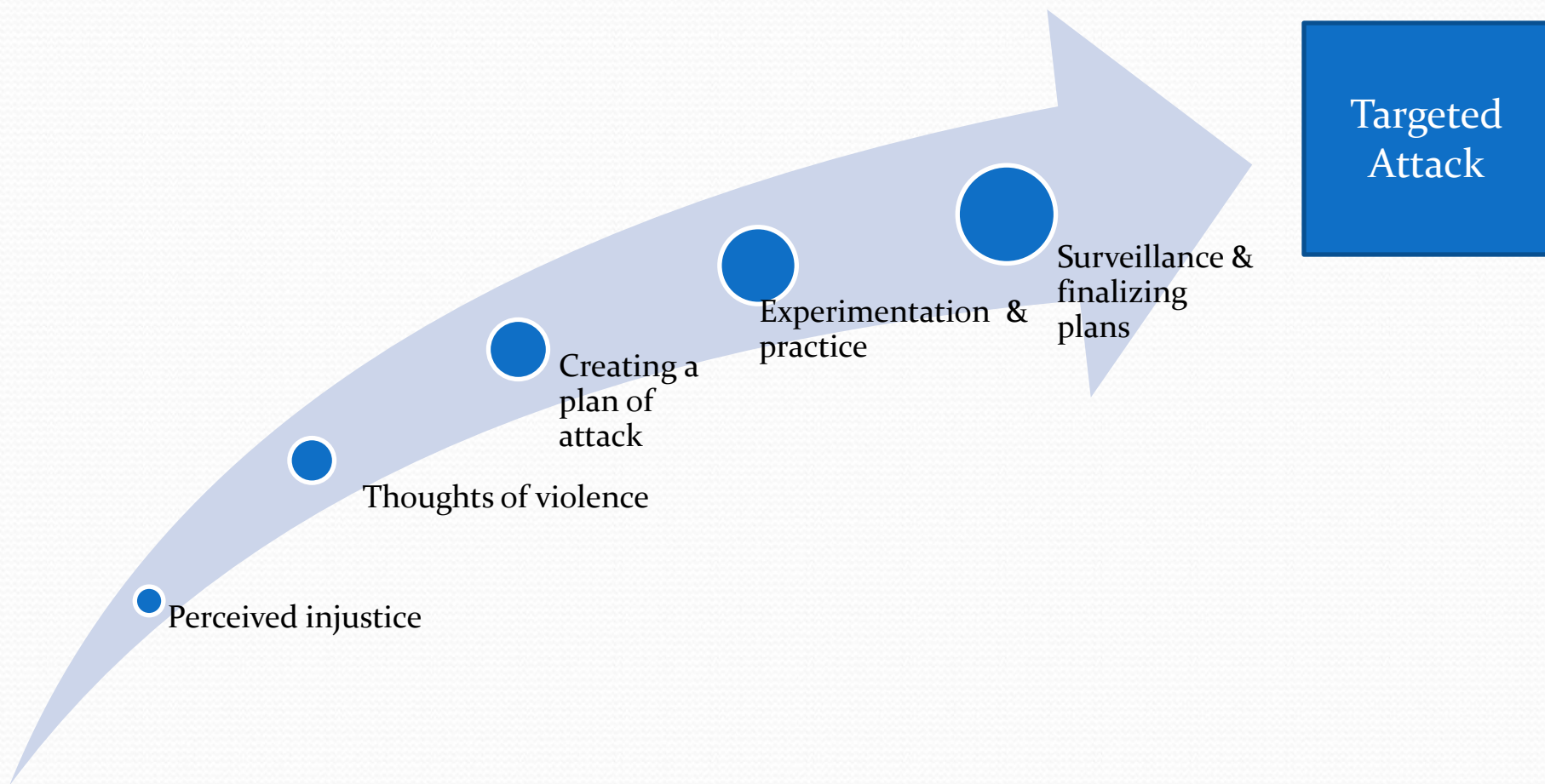
- What motivated the student to make the statements or take action?
- What have they communicated to anyone concerning his/her intentions?
- Has the student shown an interest in previous occurrences of targeted violence?
- Has the student engaged in attack-related behavior ?

# Questions For a Threat Assessment Team to Consider

- Does the student have a history of mental illness?
- How organized is the student?
- Has the student experienced a recent real or perceived loss?
- Corroboration-what is the subject saying and is it consistent with his/her actions?

# Questions For a Threat Assessment Team to Consider

- Is there concern among those that know the student?
- What factors in the subject's life and/or environment might increase/decrease the likelihood of an attempted attack?



Adapted from Calhoun & Weston (2003) and White & Meloy (2007)

# The Overlap of Suicidal Behaviors


- Threats
- Notes and documented plans
- Prior suicidal behavior
- Making final arrangements
- Preoccupation with themes of death
- Significant changes in behavior, thoughts, appearance and/or feelings

# Suicide and Targeted Attacks on Schools

- 3/4s had history
- Most had severe depression or desperate feelings prior to attacks
- “Suicide by Cop”

# A Poem

Am I insane  
To want to end this pain  
To want to end my life  
By using a sharp knife  
Am I insane  
Thinking life is profane  
Knowing life is useless  
Cause my emotions are a mess  
Am I insane  
Thinking I'm nothing to gain



Considering suicide  
Cause love has died  
Am I insane  
Wanting to spill blood like rain  
Sending them all to Hell  
From humanity I've fell

*Source: Threat Assessment in Schools. United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education, May 2002*

Attempted  
Suicide

Suicidal  
practice

Threats

Suicidal  
plans

Thoughts &  
preoccupation  
with death

Life  
event

# Student Writings/Postings as a Source of Insight

- Lack of humor
- Lack of playfulness
- Hyper profanity
- Themes of despair and hopelessness
- Negative emotionality
- Inability to take personal responsibility
- Lack of plans for the future, giving away possessions

# Student Writings/Postings as a Source of Insight

- Creating a video “will”
- Warrior, pseudo commander mentality
- Systematic indication of homicide/suicide themes
- Grandiosity
- Desire for fame
- Obsession with extremist groups
- Fascination with previous school violence
- Repetitive viewing of violent scenes

# Analysis Guidelines From the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals

- Consideration of multiple behavioral and risk factors
- Consideration of contextual factors
- Consideration of deterrent factors, mitigating factors, or inhibitors to risk, as well as risk factors
- Consideration of potential stressors as well as resiliency factors
- Access sufficient credible, first-hand collateral data sources
- Avoidance of over-reliance on single factors in most cases
- Factors considered must be scientifically relevant or those typically considered within the field based upon empirical and published literature
- Must assess the impact of gathering information and investigative/threat assessment process itself upon risk

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# Levels of Risk: Low

- Poses a minimal risk to the victim and public safety
- Is vague
- Information is inconsistent, implausible or lacks details
- Lacks realism
- Content suggests person is unlikely to carry out the threat

# Levels of Risk: Medium or Moderate

- Could be carried out, although it may not appear entirely realistic
- More direct and more concrete than a low level threat
- Wording suggests the individual has given some thought to how it would be carried out
- Includes a general indication of place and time but signs still fall short of a detailed plan
- No strong indication that the individual has taken preparatory steps
- Statements seek to convey that the threat is not empty

# Levels of Risk: High

- Direct, specific and plausible
- Appears to pose imminent and serious danger to safety of others
- Suggests concrete steps have been taken
- Almost always requires bringing law enforcement



## Rating Form

Randy Borum, PsyD, Patrick Bartel, PhD,  
and Adelle Forth, PhD

Client Name: _____	ID#: _____
Date of Birth: ____/____/____	Age: _____ Gender: _____
Evaluator: _____	Today's Date: ____/____/____

The rating criteria included on this form are intended for use in conjunction with the SAVRY Professional Manual. The rater should refer to the Professional Manual for complete rating descriptions and criteria.

**Notes:**

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# ATAP Guidelines: Triggers in Adults

- Real or perceived
- Negative job event/job prospects
- Rejection and abandonment
- Increased impact of mental illness
- Civil or criminal justice system event(s)
- Disruption of support systems
- Financial problems

# Inhibitors/Stabilizers

- Treatment availability, utilization, and past receptivity
- Positive family nurturance
- Other social support
- Spiritual or religious beliefs opposing violence
- Connectedness and healthy affectionate relationships

# Non-Typical Role of a “Mental Health Professional”

- Develop an understanding based upon brain/behavior relationships

# Normal Adolescence

- Not Just Little Adults
- Raging hormones
- Just need to grow up
- Becoming independent from adults
- The development of the frontal lobes and Executive Functioning

# Neuropsychology: The Study of Brain-Behavior Relationships

- Who we are
- How we experience the world
- How we react to our environment