

Experts Say Suicide, Not Homicide Is a Larger Threat to Nation's College Campuses

by Sarah Lake
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The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and Northern Illinois University shootings have garnered much media attention, but suicide is a larger threat to the nation's college students, said a panel at the American Psychiatric Association's annual meeting in Washington.

"The big issue at universities is suicide, not homicide," said Dr. Steven S. Sharfstein, chair of the symposium entitled "The Social Responsibility of Universities for the Mental health of Students and Community Safety."

In hopes of preventing suicide among students there has been an increased demand for mental health services on college campuses around the country, said Dr. Jerald Kay, co-chair of the panel. "One of the clear findings from all the surveys is that more and more of our students are asking for help, and more of our students are matriculating now into universities and colleges with previous, rather significant psychiatric histories," he said at the meeting, which is being held May 3-8 in Washington.

Over the last 15 years depression has nearly doubled in the United States, while suicidal behavior has tripled and sexual assaults have quadrupled, Kay added.

This increased demand is stretching many campus counseling centers to the limit, Kay noted. "We're dealing with problems that are really widespread in a time when resources have not kept up, and this has been one of the challenges we have had to face," he said.

A lack of resources is leaving many students with limited on-campus mental health support, Kay said. "At least 40 percent or greater of our schools do not have psychiatric services whatsoever."

Alison Malmon, founded Active Minds, an organization that utilizes peer groups to form student-run support groups and advocacy campaigns to decrease the stigma associated with mental illness. Her older brother, Brian, committed suicide after being diagnosed with Schizoaffective Disorder while attending Columbia University.

"Basically, what we're finding is that counseling centers across the nation are overwhelmed and underfunded," Malmon said. She said organizations such as Active Minds helps to take some of the burden off of university counseling centers by making use of peer-to-peer student interaction. "Active Minds and other groups like ours come into play because we are trying to reach students and promote awareness and create that level of outreach that counseling centers aren't able to provide anymore," she said.

Malmon emphasized the difference students can make in preventing suicides on campus. "We undervalue the role that students play among each other," she said. She used Seung-Hui Cho, the young man who gunned down 32 people at Virginia

Tech before turning the gun on himself last year, as an example. "Cho did not speak to his roommates for months and his roommate knew full well that he wasn't speaking to them," she said. "They had a role that they could play in identifying that something might be wrong and reporting it to people that they could trust and they felt comfortable with."

Dr. Paul Appelbaum said that many colleges and universities are mishandling their suicidal students by forcing them to leave school after a mental health episode, which may lead to increased anxiety, depression and even suicide.

"We hear a lot, unfortunately, of fear mongering, and those exaggerated concerns have led to a lot of bad policy," he said. "If students know that talking about suicidality means they will be suspended, that means they won't talk about their suicidality. And the only opportunity we may have to intervene with them and keep them alive, or at the very least treat their distress so that their lives are not in jeopardy, will be formative to their fear of the consequences of speaking about it openly," he continued. "Moreover, their fellow students, their roommates, their colleagues in class, their boyfriends or girlfriends may similarly not want to share that information for fear that the consequence will be that the student will be punished for being depressed or be punished for a brief psychotic episode."

Appelbaum said colleges and universities should evaluate whether a student is mentally healthy enough to stay in school on a case-by-case basis, rather than having a one-size-fits-all policy. "I suggest here that the safest approach from the administrative perspective is also the fairest approach," he said. "Students deserve individualized evaluations."

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