

Secondary Traumatic Stress and the Ottawa Shooting: What happens when we all go back to our regular lives?

By Françoise Mathieu, M.Ed., R.P., CCC.

(This article was written in response to the October 2014 Ottawa shooting on Parliament Hill)

Many people were directly impacted by the events in Ottawa last week - most affected, of course, was the victim's family, the perpetrator's loved ones, the good samaritans who rushed to Cpl. Nathan Cirillo's help, the paramedics and police officers who responded to the scene, all of the individuals inside the Parliament building who witnessed the gun fight, and everyone else who was on the Hill: those who spent hours in lockdown, the tourists and passersby who witnessed the attack, the media and a whole host of other people I am probably forgetting. Some of these individuals were directly exposed to a trauma while others experienced a more indirect form of traumatic exposure.

As one moves away from the epicentre of the tragedy, we can list millions of other individuals who were deeply affected by the shooting - Ottawa citizens, Canadian viewers who watched it on the news and of course the global community. These folks were not exposed to direct trauma, but were potentially secondarily traumatized all the same: If you watched some of the raw media footage which was shown on our TV screens minutes after the shooting, you may have noticed some very graphic, rather disturbing images centered around the victim. I noticed that as the day progressed, while the footage was being shown in a continuous loop, it was slightly altered to mask some of the more disturbing elements of the scene. (You may not have noticed that, but I have a homing device for trauma exposure in the public sphere and how it's done, call it my own personal mission and obsession). However, with YouTube, and dozens of passersby able to film the scene with their smart phones, it won't be hard to see that raw footage somewhere on the net, if one looks hard enough. I am not sure why the media outlets decided to stop showing the more graphic details - was it out of respect for the victim's family? A decision to spare the viewers? Maybe a bit of both, and that's a good thing. Too bad it doesn't happen more often.

Thankfully, our degree of understanding of traumatic stress has significantly improved over the past decade - most people are now fairly familiar with the concept of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and have no difficulty understanding that those at the centre of a tragic event like the Ottawa shooting might be significantly affected for weeks and perhaps months to come. We also know that some individuals are more vulnerable to traumatic stressors and may develop more significant psychological distress as a result of this event: the severity of the reaction is determined by a prior trauma history, a history of mental illness or addiction, a person's personality and coping styles, whether or not they were able to seek good quality debriefing afterwards, the quality of their social supports and several other factors.

One thing is clear - when we experience a traumatic event, many of us have a strong need to talk about it with others. This is a very good thing. Talk, write, share with your loved ones, with your work colleagues and your friends. This urge to connect and tell our story can also happen to us during very intense happy events - talk to any new mother about her birth story hours or days after the delivery, and she will give you the play-by-play of each cube of ice she chewed on

and what centimetres of dilation she was at. Talk to her again a year later, and she will likely tell you, in a nutshell, that "it hurt like hell and took 26 hours" but unless it was a very traumatic birth, she will no longer need to share minute by minute account of what happened. This is completely normal. With traumatic events that involve a criminal act, the need to share and the trauma experienced may be more potent. An "act of God" is very different from one human being's deliberate decision to cause harm to others, even if the perpetrator is deeply psychologically troubled. So let's talk about it, absolutely.

However, we should take care to share what is necessary vs "all the gory details" unless those are extremely central to our experience. After 9/11, the *Globe and Mail* (and many other news outlets) shared some incredibly graphic photos that I will never be able to remove from my mind - I was quite traumatized by those images, and there were not necessary - I did not need to view these to be compassionate and profoundly distressed by the collapse of the Twin Towers. Fourteen years later, those photos of 9/11 still haunt me whenever I hear mention of the World Trade Centre. The same is true for the Bernardo trial, some 20 years later.

As the events in Ottawa recede, some of you may remain greatly shaken and very affected by the sounds, images and emotions surrounding the shooting. If, a few weeks from now, you feel that you are more distressed than you should be - maybe you are more upset than your colleagues, are having difficulty sleeping or focusing on other things, perhaps you are experiencing intrusive images or nightmares - please seek some support. Let's take good care of one another.

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