

OHSU psychiatrist to highlight warning signs for school shootings

May 6 2008

Oregon Health & Science University psychiatrist Jerald Block, M.D., will present new research on the psychiatric factors that can lead to school shootings. Block's presentation, which is part of a panel discussion that he is chairing, will take place on Tuesday, May 6, during the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in Washington, D.C.

There have been at least a dozen school shootings in American schools and universities within the past three years, resulting in the deaths of more than 50 students. In 1998 Oregon's Thurston High School in Springfield was the scene of a school shooting in which two students were killed and 25 others wounded.

Block's presentation will be mainly based on his extensive research of the 1999 Columbine high school shootings, which resulted in the deaths of 15 people, including the two students who initiated the attack, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Based on diaries and police records, Block authored a July 2007 article for the American Journal of Forensic Psychiatry titled "Lessons from Columbine: Virtual and Real Rage." Block will also briefly discuss the role of technology in the Red Lake (2005), Virginia Tech (2007), Jokela High School (2007), and North Illinois (2008) school shootings.

The paper on Columbine examines the many factors that may have influenced the shooters and specifically highlights the role that technology played in the tragedy. Prior to the shootings, both teenagers

spent a significant amount of time playing first-person-shooter computer games and creating game levels for others to use. In his paper, Block suggests that these virtual worlds became essential for the teens. Block notes that Harris and Klebold may have been unable to distinguish the boundaries between their virtual lives and their real lives, in effect mixing the two.

“Virtual realities, like the ones that Harris and Klebold experienced, are a double-edged sword,” explained Block, a clinical faculty member in the OHSU Department of Psychiatry. “On one hand, virtual worlds allow people to feel connected and empowered. They also allow participants to escape stress and have an outlet for aggression. On the other hand, when a heavy user must eliminate or cut back on the virtual, as was the case with these two killers at times, the user can feel lonely, anxious, or angry. In some ways, virtual reality is similar to alcohol. In moderation it can be healthy or even helpful. In excess it can be destructive and isolating. And, when a person goes 'dry,' the situation can turn dangerous.”

During the APA meeting, two other experts will join Dr. Block in presenting information about school shootings. Katherine Newman, the Malcolm Forbes Class of 1941 Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs from Princeton University, will speak about the communities where school shootings occur and whether we can predict and prevent these tragedies. FBI Special Agent Terri Royster will discuss the FBI’s procedure for assessing school shooting threats.

This is the second presentation within the past three months in which Block has commented on a psychiatric issue with widespread public impacts. In March 2008 Block’s editorial on the widespread problem of Internet addiction received international media attention.

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