

Researchers analyze student grief online after campus shootings

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Doctoral student Amanda Vicary and psychology professor R. Chris Fraley are the first to study psychological responses and grieving behaviors online after a campus shooting. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer, U. of I. News Bureau.

After the campus shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007 and Northern Illinois University in 2008, hundreds of affected students turned to social media websites to share their grief and search for solace. A new study of these students found that their online activities neither helped nor harmed their long-term psychological health.

The study, which appears in [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#), gives a first-of-its-kind portrait of student reactions to shootings on their campuses. It also documents the (online and off-line) activities they engaged in to memorialize and recover from these events.

"After the shooting at Virginia Tech I noticed immediately on my Facebook account that my friends were changing their pictures to memorial ribbons or they were joining groups to support the students at Virginia Tech," said Amanda Vicary, a doctoral student who conducted the study with University of Illinois psychology professor R. Chris Fraley. "I started looking (for studies on this topic) and realized that no research had been done looking at how people use the Internet specifically to grieve or investigating how students responded psychologically to these shootings."

Two weeks after the shootings at Virginia Tech, Vicary sent an e-mail* to 900 Virginia Tech students with Facebook accounts inviting them to participate in an [online survey](#).

One hundred twenty-four of those students chose to do so. The survey assessed the students for symptoms of depression and [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD), and asked them about their participation in online and off-line activities related to the shootings.

Vicary conducted a second survey of many of the same students six weeks later (two months after the shootings).

After a gunman killed five and injured 18 people at Northern Illinois (10 months after the shootings at Virginia Tech), Vicary conducted a similar survey there, with 160 NIU students responding.

The combined results from both campuses revealed that 71 percent of the respondents suffered from significant symptoms of depression and 64 percent had significant symptoms of PTSD two weeks after the shootings on their campuses.

Many respondents reported that they had participated in online memorials, texted, sent e-mails or instant messages or posted comments

about the tragedies on social networking sites such as Facebook. Nearly 90 percent had joined at least one Facebook group concerning the shooting. More than 70 percent had replaced their profile pictures with a Virginia Tech or NIU memorial ribbon, and 28 percent had posted a message on a memorial website.

"It was fascinating from my point of view to see how grief and mourning plays out on the Internet and to learn that it works in a way that's very similar to the way it would if we were doing this outside of a digital framework," Fraley said. "People were sharing their thoughts and feelings with their friends on Facebook. They were attending virtual vigils, joining groups, doing many of the same kinds of things they would do in the non-digital world."

"Two months later, a fair amount of students were still suffering from significant symptoms, but many had recovered pretty considerably," Vicary said. Depressive symptoms still affected 30 percent of respondents (down from 71 percent), and PTSD was still an issue for 22 percent of them (down from 64 percent).

Most of the students reported that their online activities related to the shootings made them feel better, Vicary said. But the analysis revealed that the degree to which students engaged in online activities or communications about these tragedies had no discernable effect on their ultimate recovery from depressive or [PTSD](#) symptoms.

It may be that the students' online activities did help them feel a little better, Vicary said, but that immediate effect apparently did not translate into a long-term change.

The findings are instructive, however, because they show that the students' online activities were not harmful to their [psychological health](#), Vicary said.

"Whenever a tragedy like this occurs, there is a debate in the news concerning students and their reliance on the Internet," she said. "Is it harming them? Is this doing something detrimental to their well-being? And in terms of what we found with grieving behaviors after these tragedies, the answer is no."

More information: "Student Reactions to the Shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University: Does Sharing Grief and Support Over the Internet Affect Recovery?" medicine.journalfeeds.com/psychiatry-recovery/20100930/

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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