

On-air shooting highlights 'American phenomenon' of disgruntled former employee, trauma expert says

September 1 2015, by Rachel Stern

The concept of a disgruntled former employee shooting coworkers seems to be an especially American phenomenon, says Nancy Smyth, dean and professor in the University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

"People feel wronged and in their minds, the injustices accumulate and they feel it is perfectly fine for them to take things into their own hands," she said. "They feel slighted and it is scary because sometimes you might not even know you slighted someone."

A former reporter who was fired by a Virginia television station shot and killed two of the station's journalists as they broadcast live on Wednesday morning.

"In this case, he went out of his way to do it on a video that was recording. Part of it was that he wanted the recognition," Smyth said. "To have those images, those pictures and those sounds captured live, that is what embeds this in people's brains and makes it difficult to heal from."

When we tune into war coverage on television, we prepare ourselves for horror, she said, so seeing it is not a shock to the system.

But when watching the [local news](#), we don't expect to see death unfold live – and it is that unexpected nature, coupled with the graphic detail,

that can cause [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), she said.

"Traumatic losses are always more difficult to grieve than losses that we are expecting," Smyth said, whose research focuses on psychological trauma. "For coworkers of the deceased, a traumatic event like this shatters a sense of safety, control and predictability in their lives."

The images and sounds associated with such a horrific event can leave an enduring, intrusive memory in the brains of most people who witness it, she added. And it is especially meaningful for those who can identify with the victims.

"Anyone who works in the journalism field will say, 'oh my god, that could have been me,'" Smyth said. "The more one can identify with the victims, the stronger the reaction tends to be."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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