

The emotional aftereffects of trauma on communities

February 28 2024, by Matt Jacob



Good Grief | Alli and Ruthanne (2023), an oil on paper by Sara Jean Odam, is currently showing in Barrick Museum of Art's exhibition The Emotional Show through March 16, 2024. Credit: the artist and the Barrick Museum of Art

It was shortly before noon on Dec. 6, 2023, and Stephen Benning had

just wrapped up a Zoom meeting in his office in the Carol C. Harter Classroom Building Complex when his office and cell phones pinged. It was a university-issued alert that campus police were responding to a report of shots fired.

At first, the UNLV psychology professor didn't know what to think. Was the notification sent by mistake? Was it a drill?

With a second alert moments later, he knew it was not. He promptly dragged a desk in front of his office door. Like thousands of UNLV students and staff on campus that day, he hunkered down for the next several hours.

Benning—who also directs UNLV's Psychophysiology of Emotion and Personality laboratory—was able to keep his emotions in check. He occupied his time checking on the welfare of colleagues and students via text, and responded to similar messages sent to him.

Even as police escorted him from his office, Benning focused not on his own mental condition but that of others. The expert in clinical psychology, psychopathy, emotion, and personality was willing to administer psychological first aid to anyone in need.

He spent the next few hours standing outside a reunification area at the Thomas & Mack Center before finally heading home around 7 p.m. Even that night, as he spoke to his family about the trauma of the day, Benning remained mostly in clinician mode, setting aside his personal emotions.

That all changed the next morning when Benning drove back to campus, walked into his office, and noticed what was hanging on his desk chair: his coat.

He flashed back to the previous winter, when he was battling a serious health issue. "I had severe anemia and would've been deathly cold being outside that long in those temperatures without a jacket. So seeing the jacket on my desk chair, I thought, 'Oh, I guess I wasn't even really that cold; I didn't even need my jacket.'

"That's when the first wave of emotion hit me. There was that sense of gratitude of having survived a serious medical condition, but then also a rueing of having been barricaded during a [mass shooting](#)."

The acute phase of trauma recovery

Benning would experience a series of emotional ups and downs in the days that followed the on-campus shooting that claimed the lives of three fellow faculty members.

And he knew most members of the UNLV community were dealing with similar emotional trauma—whether they were on campus during the shooting or not.

So Benning harkened back to a yearlong, in-depth psychological trauma study he conducted in the wake of the 2017 shooting that claimed the lives of 58 people attending an outdoor country music festival on the Las Vegas Strip.

The [1 October study](#) featured more than 120 participants and examined their psychological symptoms and feelings. About one-third of respondents were on the festival grounds; the rest were Southern Nevada residents.

Respondents were encouraged to share—via self-report questionnaires—their stories, feelings, and experiences in the tragedy's immediate aftermath, known as the acute stress period. Benning and his

team then reconnected with respondents during the post-traumatic period at intervals of 45 days, three months, six months, and one year.

The goal of these follow-ups: to track how much (if at all) the participants' emotional trauma diminished over time.

Most [psychological studies](#) on this topic are retrospective—that is, well after the acute period, Benning explained.

"I wanted to understand what was happening as things were unfolding," he says. "First, I wanted to get a picture of what the community was going through and help people understand the variety of the reactions they were having. Also, I wanted to learn, from a psychological perspective, if there's a difference between the acute stress period and the post-traumatic stress period.

"We also wanted to get these stories because people experience trauma in very different ways. And our [self-report questionnaires](#) can only do so much to capture the effects that trauma has on people; they don't necessarily get at how people experienced and remember the events themselves."

So in the wake of the Dec. 6 shooting at UNLV, Benning updated his 1 October study and submitted it to the university's Institutional Review Board, which approves and monitors studies to ensure they meet ethical standards, follow policies, and protect research participants.

Although the board fast-tracked the study's reactivation, Benning only had a window of about three weeks to recruit participants. The reason: The acute-stress period must be captured within the first 30 days of a traumatic event.

To promote the study, he turned to traditional and social media, as well

as university channels such as employee and student newsletters. During the brief recruitment period, 85 people filled out at least a portion of the online self-report survey.

Respondents were asked to answer open-ended questions, such as:

- What do you remember about the day, from the morning through the evening?
- How did you feel?
- What do you wish you knew more or less about?
- Were you in Las Vegas at the time of the 1 October shooting at the Route 91 festival?

"Psychologist Jamie Pennebaker has done work suggesting that writing about trauma might benefit those who have gone through it, especially when given some structured prompts," Benning says. "So one of the things we wanted to do with this study was to give participants an initial opportunity to write about it, perhaps organize their own understanding of what happened, and give them some tools to [detail] their experiences."

Among the 85 initial respondents, Benning received a complete data set from 73 individuals, with a mix of students, faculty, and staff. More than half were on campus at the time of the Dec. 6 shooting, with 16 in close proximity to the incident—at Beam Hall, the Student Union, or Pida Plaza—and 27 locked down elsewhere on campus.

Of the remaining participants, 12 had been on campus but departed before the lockdown; 17 didn't come to campus that day; and one was near but not actually on campus.

While the approach and methodology of the two surveys were largely the same, Benning did make a couple of minor tweaks based on results of

the 1 October study.

For instance, among 1 October respondents, Benning noticed a psychological trend of feeling disconnected from reality.

"This time it was important to learn the broader sense of psychological distress that people might be experiencing," Benning says. "So, we [introduced] more measures about what we call peritraumatic dissociation—that is, the sense that you are feeling somewhat divorced from your experiences as a person, or that the experiences that are happening to you do not feel real."

Benning also gleaned from his 1 October research that it was important to inquire about changes to eating and substance use habits post-shooting; if those affected by trauma reported being more sensitive to feelings of anxiety; and if those affected were able to process their own emotions in the immediate aftermath.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from the initial study, though, was how participants perceived support from friends and loved ones—and how those perceptions affected their overall sense of well-being.

Benning notes that a large percentage of participants in the 1 October study said they interpreted seemingly encouraging statements like "feel better" and "you can get back to life" as invalidating and critical. This was true starting within the first 45 days of the traumatic event.

"They felt as if they were being perceived as weak or deficient, rather than that they had been through a trauma and were having a difficult time with it," Benning says.

The first study revealed that the more people felt like they were targets of criticism, the higher their levels of post-traumatic stress and

depression. And, as time went on, these perceived criticisms negatively impacted their feelings of well-being.

Conversely, those who felt truly supported saw a decrease in traumatic symptoms and an increase in well-being.

"One thing we're doing in this current study is asking [participants] to describe—using a few words or a couple of sentences—what kinds of criticism they may be experiencing," Benning says. "Because if people are perceiving others as critical of them, they're likely going to feel worse, not better."

Benning's professional advice to those who genuinely want to help others struggling to overcome the trauma from Dec. 6: Lean heavily on empathetic, rather than prescriptive, language.

"Telling someone they should be over it or should feel better or should get back to it—you might think you're being supportive, but it doesn't seem to work," Benning says. "In fact, it could actually make those [psychologically traumatic] symptoms worse."

Comparing the responses between 1 October and December 6

Benning says it's too soon to predict if certain outcomes will mirror those from his research from six years ago. In fact, he points out that other than the close proximity of the two tragedies, the circumstances and scope of the incidents are quite different.

Still, a traumatic experience is a traumatic experience. Which is why Benning says he would be surprised if his research doesn't result in some overlapping psychological discoveries.

"One thing we found from the 1 October study is that about three months afterward, the level of symptoms among people in the community had returned to what we would consider a baseline level," he says. "But those same symptoms remained elevated among those who were at the concert when the shooting took place.

"I would expect that people who were actually [near the UNLV] shooting are going to then have the highest level of traumatic symptoms. We would expect that to decline over time, and if it didn't, that would be somewhat surprising to me. But among people who were [near the shooting site], it also would be surprising if their symptoms declined so quickly that within three months they were at the level consistent with the broader community. That would be much faster than I would expect."

Once his latest research is completed near the end of this year, Benning says he will cross-compare the results of the two studies. From there, he hopes to share his findings during a community presentation at the Resiliency & Justice Center that was established after the 1 October massacre. Its mission is to help survivors of violent crimes throughout Nevada.

He also plans to make the research available to other community partners—both inside and outside of Nevada.

"When it comes to the Las Vegas community, I certainly hope this isn't something that we ever need to study again," Benning says. "But if we have insights from this study that are useful for others, it's important to share our findings with other communities in ways that might help them heal after unfortunate similar tragedies."

Speaking of healing, Benning stresses that it's completely normal for each individual impacted by a traumatic event to experience a

tremendous range of emotions and reactions. However, there is no quick psychological fix.

He also stresses the importance of understanding that each will travel down their own road to recovery. And that understanding should extend to those who weren't directly impacted by the events of Dec. 6, 2023.

"Assuming that there's a one-size-fits-all response to these kinds of traumatic events—it's not reality," Benning says. "So, while I can understand the desire to try to help people feel better and to [get them] to resume a typical level of functioning, those kinds of statements often come across as criticisms.

"It's much more helpful to involve people in activities—not assuming that people are too broken or too damaged to go out and do fun things. Not only is it OK, but it's important to engage in things that promote your healing. Just as it's important to recognize that your journey is your own."

Provided by University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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