

'We need to treat this as a disaster': Psychologist weighs in on community grief, healing

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Portapique memorials are shown on Tuesday. (Shaina Luck/CBC)

Condolences are pouring in from across the country and around the world as Nova Scotians mourn 22 victims who died in a murderous rampage over the weekend.

The victims include an RCMP officer, a family of three, two Correctional Service of Canada employees, a retired nursing home worker and a young father. They died in a series of attacks that lasted more than 12 hours across several communities.

The suspect also died, following a confrontation with police.

The RCMP have said while the suspect knew some of the victims, it appears others were not known to him.

The murders have prompted expressions of disbelief, sorrow, grief, and outrage as people try to come to grips with the magnitude of the crime.

Dr. Simon Sherry, a psychologist at Dalhousie University in Halifax, says it's important for the community to grieve and mourn the loss of the victims of the mass shooting this week. He says it's also important to ask difficult questions.

He spoke with the host of CBC Cape Breton's Mainstreet, Wendy Bergfeldt.

Talking a little about mass shootings and why they cut to the core of us collectively as a community, can you maybe go over that?

There's a difference between a natural disaster, which can obviously be something serious like an avalanche or a hurricane, and a disaster which is human perpetrated. We're now trying to wrap our head around something that one human has done to another and this particular mass shooting gets at some core fears and concerns for us as humans. It's threatened and attacked our sense of safety and security within our world and within our homes. It has also undermined our trust in that the shooter apparently dressed and acted like a police officer, and from that perspective this is definitely a threatening event.

We know that when individuals process grief there are ways that we move through it, and I can see that in the last day or two we have gone from the initial horror to heartbreak. Can you tell me about the process that is happening right now?

Not all grief and not all trauma is the same and it's important to realize that losing someone from natural causes through old age is different than losing someone from the shocking, the traumatic, and undignified circumstances. It makes for a more difficult experience to process and loss to grieve.

Here in Nova Scotia, it didn't take very long for everyone to figure out who is connected to who. But still most of us are not involved in this from a first-hand standpoint, can you explain to me what I'm seeing in people not immediately associated with this?

At this point in Nova Scotia all of us have been exposed to this mass shooting and a subset of us are being affected by this mass shooting. Within this mass shooting, there are primary victims but there are also secondary victims who may be loved ones. Beyond that this is heavy and impactful for many Nova Scotians and it's important to realize that no one person or no one group has a monopoly on grief, we will each hurt in our own way. This is a different sort of loss, it's a community wide stressor and it's a community-wide trauma. It is hitting us all heavily.



Children sign a Canadian flag at an impromptu memorial in front of the RCMP detachment in Enfield. It was the home detachment of slain RCMP Const. Heidi Stevenson. (Tim Krochak/Getty Images)

We seem to be collectively creating ceremony, creating symbols even in this time of COVID when we are apart. Is this a part of the communal process?

The social aspect of grief and loss is enormously important and our usual rituals of grieving, like funerals, are now in many ways disrupted. I am certainly heartened by the displays of community and solidarity and I think they are important for us collectively grieving this trauma.

People change when they go through grief, do communities change when they go through grief?

I think that in the wake of this mass shooting, we need to treat it as a disaster, we can't treat it as our American counterparts might. Unfortunately in America, there is a mass shooting on average every 12.5 days and those shootings have become so commonplace we now forget the names and locations of those involved. In Canada, we are different and I think we need to carefully ask ourselves what we can as a society do to prevent these events from happening again. I think too quickly and too easily there can be a narrative that builds up around the single actions of an abhorrent mentally ill person who snapped. I think the part of our making meaning out of these events is to ask difficult questions about what we as a society have done and how we as a society have failed when events like this occur.

There is a lot of anger around events like this and there is a lot of anger directed at the perpetrator and rightfully so. Is there any collective benefit of not mentioning the perpetrators name or describing them?

I understand the anger and I understand the shunning but I don't think we can just push this aside and dismiss this person as someone who is not a product of our culture. For example, these types of mass shootings tend to occur in cultures that place greater emphasis on individualism. We have never been more separate and apart than we are now. That means that we have fewer interactions with each other and have fewer eyes on each other and because of that certain troubled people now slip through the cracks. If we want to, in time, push and ask more difficult questions we are going to have to ask, as Canadians, are we willing to encroach upon cherished freedoms in order to prevent events like this from happening again. This could be like reducing access to weapons, this could be more readily reporting on people who seem to be distressed. Those aren't questions I have

answers for, but those are questions I think we need to be asking in the wake of this event.

If you are seeking mental health support during this time, here are resources available to Nova Scotians: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/how-to-access-grief-support-in-nova-scotia-1.5538520>.