

# IMAGINE THE UNIMAGINABLE

by Sandra McCleaster RRT



The American higher education community was dealt a stunning reality check when on April 16th a 23 year old Virginia Tech student shot and killed 33 people and wounded many others. Cho Seung-Hui was gunning down people as he saw them, finally and thankfully turning his weapon on himself. This horrific incident goes down in history as the worst mass shooting in America.

The deadly rampage occurred right within Virginia Tech's classrooms, at the hands of a student with a track record of disturbing and bizarre behavior. Reportedly, Cho's problems had been percolating for years, but considering the final event, it's pointless to speculate as to what triggered this young man to finally crash and burn.

Not surprisingly, the massacre pushed the topic of campus security to the forefront of the education agenda, raising some tough questions about security at our schools. Just how safe are they? What can be done to make them more secure?

Even if everyone with a history of mental or psychological distress could be identified (and of course, they cannot), those persons can't be summarily denied pursuit of their education or be physically banned from a college campus. Discriminating against the disabled is just out and out illegal and there are privacy factors at stake as well.

Larger societal issues are up for discussion too. Gun control, for one. Whether mentally ill people should be forced into treatment is another. (Under federal law, anyone who has been

judged to be a danger to himself or others because of mental illness is prohibited from buying a gun. But Cho had never been officially diagnosed with mental illness and even though several of his teachers had referred him for counseling, he had never actually sought help for himself.)

Human nature being what it is, most horrible incidents trigger a "blame game." As if things weren't difficult enough on that fateful day, the media went into attack mode, feeding the waves of anger and accusations that came in the aftermath of the shootings. Long before the bodies were even identified, reporters were asking "Couldn't college officials have done something to prevent this senseless bloodshed?" To be sure, students and parents were outraged that the school took so much time to notify people that a gunman was on the loose. Certainly it's not unreasonable to think that, in this day of high technology, some mechanism could have existed to notify the masses that a serious threat was in progress. If communication had been better, would the outcome have been any different? That's something we'll never know.

But please. Let us not be too harsh on the Virginia Tech security personnel. College campuses are often too vast and sprawling to be effectively secured, part of the reason why crisis management is so difficult. And in all fairness, most college police and public safety officials would be ill-equipped to deal with a mass casualty incident of such monumental proportion. Nonetheless, this tragedy does serve as a reminder that schools need to be prepared and being prepared starts with having a well-defined plan for emergency management in place.

Violent crime on college campuses is nothing new, but the number of incidents has actually been going down for years. We know this because of a federal law that requires colleges to annually document campus crime and public safety issues. That law, the Jeanne Clery Act, is part of a Higher Education Act which requires colleges and universities to disclose certain information about their campus crime and security policies. All institutions of post secondary education that participate in federal student aid programs are subject to the Clery Act. The legislation came about subsequent to the dormitory rape and murder of Lehigh University freshman Jeanne Clery in the 1980s. An outgrowth of that law was the formation of "Security on Campus" (SOC), a Pennsylvania based group founded to promote safety at the nation's colleges and universities. This group, among other things, provides continuing education in best practices for college police and other campus officials. Ironically, the SOC 2007 annual conference just happened to fall the same week as the Virginia Tech massacre. This small coincidence had the effect of placing hundreds of college public safety and security officers in the same place at the same time. So not surprisingly, talk of the Virginia Tech killings eclipsed the planned agenda and quickly dominated the conference. Attendees flocked to meeting rooms to brainstorm. In the end, two big issues emerged: What to do with 'sick' students and what more can be done to assure campus security?

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*The Courage to Nap... continued from page 59*

and then gently wakes you just one third of an hour later. Later on in the advertisement there is a disclaimer and a statement regarding the lack of FDA approval and lack of peer reviewed scientific studies.

Despite the conflicting information I have provided I would like to end with the positive benefits of an afternoon nap. One study from Australia by Brooks and Lack looked at the benefits of different length naps. The study revealed that the five minute nap produced few benefits in comparison with a no nap control. However the ten minute nap produced immediate improvements in all outcome measures including sleep latency, subjective sleepiness, fatigue, vigor, and cognitive performance with some of these benefits maintained for as long as 155 minutes. However, a 30 minute nap produced a period of impaired alertness and performance suggesting sleep inertia followed later on by improvements also lasting up to 155 minutes after the nap. Based on the information we have at this time, we recommend a short afternoon nap to improve well being and performance. Taking some poetic license and hopefully not infringing on any trademarks, "to perform strong, nap strong" just don't get caught.

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*Imagine the Unimaginable... continued from page 46*

Certainly a person as disturbed as Cho doesn't get that way overnight. But high schools tend to remain silent about their troubled students, understandably just breathing a huge sigh of relief when they graduate and are gone - only to have them surface later at our nation's colleges and universities. Besides, once they're of age, legal concerns limit what a school can do when a student is suspected of being mentally ill.

Perhaps locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen, within days of the Virginia Tech tragedy, two pieces of relevant legislation were introduced: Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) introduced a bill to ensure that all colleges and universities develop emergency response procedures and campus notification systems; Congressman Tim Murphy (R-PA) proposed a bill that will allow schools and universities to share a student's mental health information. They're not law yet, but at least we're thinking ahead.

This unspeakable tragedy could have happened anywhere - your church on a Sunday morning or your local Wal-Mart on a Saturday afternoon. But it didn't. It happened on a college campus. One like where so many of us work and where parents take for granted the safety of their college-aged kids.

Any teacher reading this can relate: there's that student who's really weird; then there's that loner; or the student who, for any number of reasons, makes the whole class feel uncomfortable just by his or her mere presence. Quite frankly, all we really want is for them to just go away. Cho Seung-Hui did not go away, at least not until he took 33 innocent lives with him.

All of us who've built our careers in education can only stop and think....Go, but for the grace of God...

*Sandy McCleaster RRT is a veteran therapist and educator recently retired as the program director of the Passaic Community College Respiratory Care Program. Sandy is still actively involved in her state society and in writing and lecturing on topics pertinent to the Respiratory Care profession.*

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