Tip of the Week
January 16, 2019
Why Students, Faculty, and Staff Deserve Response Options

I recently overheard a conversation between a group of students. This wasn't a discussion of social media influencers, Instagram, homework, or anything lighthearted. Rather, they were talking about the photos that were sent via Snapchat in the midst of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting. It seemed as though those photos, taken by students who were living the reality of an active shooting, made the likelihood of a shooting seem very real and very possible.

The conversation ranged from why the gunman wasn't helped before he went on the rampage (e.g., "Geez, his mom had just died. Why didn't anyone reach out to him?" "Was there anyone at school who could help him?") to what they would do in the event of an active shooting. These students happen to be Gen Z (Centennials), born between 1996 to present. Gen Z thinks differently than those before them – by nature of what they have lived through and with, Gen Z does not mess around. I know that from my own children, one of whom is on the cusp of Gen Z, and the other two are firmly seated within. They are less conservative than Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964), as rebellious as some Gen Xers (1965 to 1976), and as informed as, but more politically active than, Gen Y (Millennials). Perhaps the term most often used in association with Gen Z is *self-reliant*.

This particular group of Gen Z students are fortunate that their school district has a Behavioral Intervention Team. They are being trained on what to report and to whom – in effort to prevent an active shooting. They also know, despite the district's best efforts, there might be a time when an at-risk student slips through the cracks. The reality is, Centennials are correct. There will be times when prevention and intervention fail. Gen Z wants to, and needs to, know what they can do in the event of an active shooting. It makes sense that a self-reliant generation does not want to wait for instructions. They want training and to know what to do in advance.

When it comes to active shootings, preparation cannot stop with reporting, threat assessment, and case management. There will be times when students must shelter in place. But, their survival instinct will kick in and many students will get up prepared to act if they know that distracting the approaching gunman is their only option. In the past, prior to Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate (ALICE) and Run, Hide, Fight, we lost those who have complied to the rule of lockdown. In waiting until the gunman entered the room and slowly and methodically began shooting, generations before were taught to be static and therefore easy targets. In the past, when students fought their own urge to leave or counter, it was often in fear of breaking rules (e.g., stay put and do not move.) We have grown since then, and the majority of our nation's school districts realize the importance of allowing students the right to evacuate or counter when absolutely necessary.

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The aforementioned conversing Gen Z students were confident in their knowledge of how to respond should an active shooter enter their building. One stated, "I don't care WHO tells me to sit and wait for the police to come. If I can get out, I am getting out!!!" Their mindset was developed post-Columbine and post-Virginia Tech. Today's youth know what happened at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, and most children and adults – regardless of age – know who Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are because their legacy lives on with each new school shooting. Gen Z knows that sitting and waiting means allowing the gunman time to methodically enter a classroom, at times twice, in search of vulnerable students.

Here's where the problems arise. Our forward progress is at risk. Adults from generations before, many of whom are parents to Gen Z students, grew up in a different time and with less self-reliance. There seems to be a disconnect between Gen Z's way of thinking versus that of Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and some Millennials. I am concerned, if adults place their own fears upon their children and students, we will be back to a time in which the "sitting duck" approach was the only option for students, faculty, and staff. We can't train a self-reliant generation to be less independent. It is not in their nature to depend on others or to accept a tragic fate. They are future leaders, and adults asking them to take two steps back comes at a cost.

A recent article is of great concern. The article opposed trainings such as those involved with approaches like ALICE or Run, Hide, Fight. These drills were described as frightening and scarring to school-aged youth. Within the article, a parent was interviewed and spoke in opposition of active shooter drills. The outspoken parent was appalled at the ease with which her child and classmates spoke of what locations within their school would be safe, and what wouldn't be safe, should an active shooting unfold.

I am comforted knowing that our youth are being prepared to respond. I guarantee that the children's conversation referred to in the article, like the conversation I overheard, was calm and matter-of-fact. This generation thinks of school safety far more than any in previous times. Thinking about something and being terrified are very different. They are not afraid when they are prepared. A study by Wu et al. describes the percentage of students who think about a possible shooting at their own school. Within the same study, students claimed feeling more confident when they felt their school had a contingency plan. The following statement summarizes the findings: "Most high school students feel relatively safe in their schools (over 90% feel very safe or relatively safe in their schools), though a significant number are concerned about the possibility of a mass shooting in their school or community (nearly 60% are either somewhat concerned, fairly concerned or very concerned)."[1]

[1] Wu, et al., "2013 Hamilton College Youth Poll: Attitudes Towards Gun Control and School Violence," Knowledge Networks and Hamilton College, December 2013.

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We, the specialists, know nearly every detail of shooters' lives and every detail of the incidents because we want the senseless death to stop. I'm wondering if those who oppose exiting the building or countering, if nothing else is an option, have ever heard the details of a shooting in which students were trapped? Have they had to view photos of the deceased in their college classroom – those who froze and couldn't move or simply didn't have enough time to escape? Within those same classrooms, there were those who escaped. In fact, at Northern Illinois, one of the glass doors was shattered. The initial beliefs were that the gunman entered through the door. He did not. Rather, a group of students ducked and covered, then sprinted when there was a pause in gunfire – over and over. They broke the glass to evacuate. They survived.

Gen Z is a generation who lives on the internet, many googling school shootings to be sure they know what to do to live. We cannot attach our fears to our youth. They tend not to be as afraid as we think. They want to live just as much as we want them to. They want to know how to make that happen. Marjory Stoneman Douglas was a game changer. Gen Z got a view of what it looks and sounds like as a shooting was taking place. They are sick and tired of school shootings. They are ready to evacuate or counter if they must. This generation will NOT take an incoming shooter sitting down. As a parent, I WANT my kids to be prepared to the best of their ability. As a researcher and professor, I have to know I have done all I can to teach best practice because, should an event occur, I could not live with myself if my children or others sat passively in wait when they could have escaped.

When I have the lockdown conversation, it tends to remind me of the two types of instruction women or men used to be given in response to an attempted sexual assault. Historically, one side advised women and men not to fight back and the other said kick, fight, scream, and do anything to distract or injure this person because his or her intent is to harm you regardless. It's quite easy for those who are not in the midst to use the first advice, wait it out and let the damage occur. In truth, we instinctively know to fight back. Yet, some say to fight our own instincts. A similar dichotomy occurred in advice on how to respond to someone demanding one's belongings. I can remember hearing, "Just give them what they want, and they'll move on." Now, we know not to comply because it is likely they will harm you either way. We need to support the proactive response to an active shooter as well.

Saving lives starts with prevention via Homeland Security's See Something, Say Something approach or, less formally, having a school climate in which students feel comfortable reporting a concern. Schools need to ensure they take every report seriously and allow for easy reporting. It isn't profiling, it is doing all we can to identify those students who are struggling and allowing the behavioral intervention team to reach them, make a connection and get them help via a sound case management plan,

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before they pose a higher threat to themselves and their classmates. We can't turn our backs on struggling students. We have to reach out rather than allow marginalization or alienation to the extent students are called "garbage," (Cruz) or "the next school shooter" (too many to mention). We need to honor ALL students, not just athletes and scholars. Everyone needs to be humanized. It is also key that students treat their peers with kindness. I can't think of a manifesto in which a shooter doesn't mention how he was treated.

Parents tell their children to be careful in swimming to prevent death by drowning, wear a bicycle helmet to prevent death via head injury, and on and on. Yet, our kids get back in that pool and back on that bike. They are not paralyzed with fear from the discussion and preparation. They are more likely to survive, as are those who have scheduled trainings on proactive responses to an active shooter.

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