

On April 20, 1999, I was as senior at Columbine High School when two gunmen killed 12 students, a teacher, then killed themselves. Today, I am approaching my 7th year as a high school English teacher, and also am the Executive Director of a non-profit called The Rebels Project that supports other survivors of mass trauma. It took me a little over 10 years to confront and reflect on how the shootings at my high school impacted me, but I have learned some valuable lessons. One that sometimes needs reminding is that trauma recovery has no timeline. Another is that we can help by providing children with the tools to support them as they build resilience.

During the shooting, I was barricaded in a small office with 59 other students while the gunmen rampaged the school. 3 hours after baracadding, we were escorted out by SWAT team members, past the bodies of two students who were shot outside, Daniel Rohrbough and Rachel Scott. Much later I learned that the SWAT team, thinking there were still gunmen lose in the building, decided to save us instead of seeking out Dave Sanders, who eventually bled to death just a few rooms down the hall from where we hid. Sometimes, these details are enough for the average person to be horrified enough to keep their judgement of my recovery to themselves. However, many times I still find myself having to justify the depth and complexity of my trauma and why I struggled for so long.

Later that evening, I arrived home physically uninjured, but a completely different person. My sister, a freshman in 1999, hugged me in the driveway, feeling grateful and guilty that she got out of the school relatively quickly.

I graduated and went off to college where I experienced being blindsided by a trigger for the first, but not the last, time. You see, what I didn't remember was that the fire alarm had been going off while I was trapped in the office. So when the fire alarm sounded in my college English class to signal a drill, instead of evacuating like everyone else, I started sobbing uncontrollably. I tried to advocate for myself to professors, and was told I still had to write my final English paper about school violence or fail the class - even after confessing that I had been at Columbine. I failed that class. Actually, I failed English class twice my first go-around in college for similar reasons, which my students now find hilarious.

My first semesters of college were some of the hardest times in my life. After being surrounded by loved ones and by a support system made up of people who understood what I had gone through, I was now embarrassed, shameful, and isolated.

I was also angry. Not surprising to anyone who knows anything about grief and trauma.

For me, the manifestations of the trauma were that I developed an eating disorder and tried drugs. The drugs were fairly short-lived and lucky for me they weren't addictive. As for my sister, she just celebrated three years clean and sober and will continue to fight each day for her recovery through her trauma and her drug abuse.

I did attend formal therapy and received validation from my therapist, someone my family was lucky enough to afford, that it was okay that I was traumatized, even a year later. Silly me, I thought I should have been over it in months...

Eventually, I dropped out of college completely and worked full time. For anniversaries, I went out of town to avoid the memories - much like many of my students feel when reminded of the traumas they've experienced. Once, I had one student who stopped coming to class because the anniversary of their traumatic experience was approaching. They later told me they had to build up the courage to talk to me about it because they were embarrassed- I imagine this was similar to how I felt when I attempted to talk to my college professors.

Other tragedies also impacted me. 9/11 sent me into hysterics and prompted severe flashbacks. Virginia Tech resulted in several debilitating anxiety attacks and embarrassingly I had to call into work. I mean, it had been eight years. Though the company I worked for was pretty understanding, I could tell there were frustrations when I couldn't show up.

In 2009, 10 years after the shooting, I reconnected with people who knew what my struggles entailed. As a result of these renewed connections and acceptance I felt when returning for the anniversary, I went back to college. At first, my brother had to come to campus with me to help me navigate and feel comfortable, but eventually, I was a full-time student again, majoring in English and working toward my secondary teaching license, my struggles were mostly in math - I'm an English teacher.

After co-founding the non-profit in 2012 and having the opportunity to travel and connect with other survivors across the country, I began to see more clearly the ripples of trauma and the similarities that exist, no matter the circumstances of the event.

Columbine and my story are often sensationalized, one of the reasons I imagine I'm here today, but the feelings I experienced in the months and years following Columbine, anger, loneliness, isolation, and embarrassment are not unique to mass shooting survivors. For my students who have been traumatized in other ways, no less valid or less seriously, they are sometimes too young to be able to reflect on why they are reacting the way they are.

Survivors are blindsided by triggers all the time. Right now, the survivors in my support network who are from more recent shootings, are asking about fireworks and how long it will be until they stop diving for cover. For children and for my students, they may be blindsided while reading a short story and might tune out and stop listening to instructions. They may need choices of topics to research, write about, or study in order to avoid the freak outs.

I've also heard countless stories of survivors turning to drugs and alcohol to help numb the pain and blur the memories.

And not many of my student's families can afford therapy like my family could, and the school therapist's schedule is jamb-packed. Many of those who could benefit from therapy are embarrassed about it because of the stigma and many times, they've convinced themselves, or been convinced, that whatever they are going through doesn't warrant therapy.

I also consider how triggering events might impact my students - Would they react like me and avoid talking about it? Would they react in anger and defiance? These questions and concepts are explored during trauma informed professional developments so teachers can best support the needs of their students.

As a teacher, I wear many, many hats, but I am not always qualified to provide the support needed. Schools need more counselors, more social workers, and more psychologists. They need programs that teach children how to build resilience, how to use coping skills, and how to practice self-care. At my school, we average one counselor to every 400 students. Increasing these services will not only help children who have experienced trauma, but also help provide the skills necessary to build resilience, before a traumatic event.

Trauma is in fact a universal part of the human experience and because of this universal experience, it is critical that we address this underlying issue that connects many of our current problems - trauma is connected to suicide, to abuse, to drug addiction, even to classroom management issues. Please, consider these needs in order to ensure that all children who need mental health support, in schools and in communities, have access. And not just after a traumatic event, but beforehand as well.

In closing, and this is hard to do, but as you reflect on our stories, please do not compare traumas. Our stories and experiences are different, yes, but trauma is trauma across the board.