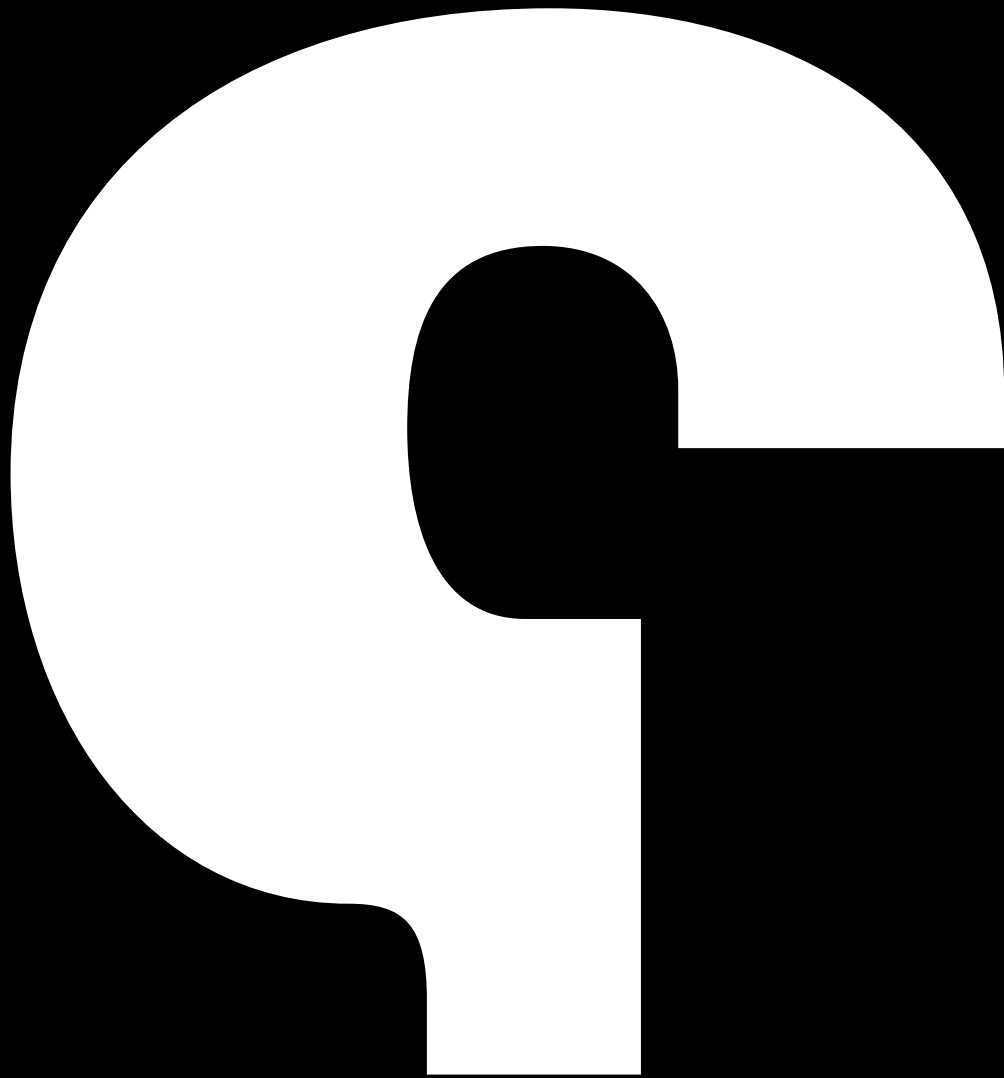




ABOUT TEENAGE VIOLENCE: IT'S THE ***RAGE***

BY DR. MARK GOULSTON

Mother: You think he'll put his fist through the wall again?

Father: Let's hope it's not his head!

So begins another episode of pillow talk between the parents of an angry teenager who has told them: "Get off my f—king back!" and then gone into his room and slammed the door behind him.

I. RECOGNIZING POTENTIALLY VIOLENT PEOPLE— INCLUDING TEENAGERS

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to recognize potentially violent teenagers. You just have to scrape away some of your denial and your “not wanting to get involved” and tune into what your stomach is trying to tell you.

Many potentially violent teenagers make us feel physically unsafe, and we can feel that uneasiness in our stomachs, tightness in our necks and throats or a severe headache. We have many early warning signals built into us that tell us when a person or a situation is unsafe. Sometimes we can be fooled, but more often than not, when we feel we are in danger, there is usually something or someone to be frightened of.

Our general reaction when we feel unsafe around a person is to avoid them, looking away and trying not to provoke them. We employ an “out of sight, out of mind” approach because they make us feel so uncomfortable. We hope they'll just go away.

There are clues* that you should LOOK and LISTEN for to determine if you might be dealing with a potentially and imminently violent person. (although both girls and boys do commit violence, I will refer to the person as male, since the majority of violent acts are still perpetrated by males).

* including material from the American Psychological Association

What to LOOK for:

- loss of temper on a daily basis
- frequent physical fighting
- significant vandalism or property damage
- increase in use of drugs or alcohol
- increase in risk-taking behavior
- detailed plans to commit acts of violence
- enjoying hurting animals
- carrying a weapon
- agitated movement—difficulty keeping still
- easily irritated—you walk on “eggshells” around him
- very impatient when having to wait in lines or wait to speak
- shifty eye movements—tends to look evasively to left or right as if hiding something, if looks downward this may be a sign of submissiveness, but may then incense him later on
- change in usual routines in terms of hobbies or exercises, etc.
- stays to self or starts associating with “marginal” people
- drawn to violent movies, newspaper stories, internet sites, television and radio shows
- less attention to hygiene
- paradoxical calmness in someone who has been agitated (may signal that has come up with a violent solution to his problems)

What to LISTEN for:

- announcing threats or plans for hurting others
- argumentative
- becomes defensive easily
- takes things personally that are not meant that way
- negative comments about most things
- complaining done with underlying agitation
- blaming—most of what he talks about is blaming someone or something
- sullen more than sulking—he can be silent in an intense way that doesn’t feel quiet, sulking means he’s getting some frustrations out

And if you notice the following signs over a period of time, the potential for violence exists:

- a history of violent or aggressive behavior
- serious drug or alcohol use
- gang membership or strong desire to be in a gang
- access to or fascination with weapons, especially guns
- threatening others regularly
- trouble controlling feelings like anger
- withdrawal from friends and usual activities
- feeling rejected or alone
- having been a victim of bullying
- poor school performance
- history of discipline problems or frequent run-ins with authority
- feeling constantly disrespected
- failing to acknowledge the feelings or rights of others

II. TRIGGERS OF TEENAGE VIOLENCE

Put Down + Pushed Away = Get In + Get Even

Nearly all the violence that we hear about in the media is triggered by rage, and more specifically, impotent rage. Impotent rage results when someone is rejected and humiliated by people (real or imagined) and feels powerless to do anything about it. Having few effective internal coping skills, they explode and lash out at the world.

Recently at Virginia Tech, Cho Seung-Hui was teased and taunted as much by the untreated and unmitigated thoughts, and perhaps voices in his head, as by other students. All of this pushed him beyond his breaking point until he sought deadly retribution.

Teasing and mocking by others, self-loathing, and negative or destructive thoughts are nearly a universal part of teenage life and fairly common in many competitive adult settings. So why do the majority of people tolerate it, with at worst some blows to their ego, whereas others have hair-triggered personalities primed to explode at the next person who irritates them and is just in the wrong place at the wrong time?

As is usually the case, there is not one single cause. There are biological, psychological and social factors involved. With strong and healthy biological, psychological and social functioning, you can withstand insults from the world without becoming injured and incensed. If, however, any of these three personality-supporting pillars are weak you will have less ability to tolerate upset.

Biologically speaking, some people just seem to come from a family of “hot heads”, and more rarely have the paranoia or paranoid schizophrenia that Cho is thought to have had and which research has shown has a significant genetic connection. Or perhaps their physiology is unbalanced. All “testosteroned-up” and nowhere to blow, they view everything as a challenge to their manhood.

Add to this the adolescent thirst for the powerful feeling of an adrenaline rush and the lowering of inhibitions by alcohol or drugs and you have a human Molotov cocktail set to explode.

From the psychological perspective, violent people possess little if any “object constancy.” Object constancy is the ability to retain and feel some positive attachment (meager though it may be) to another person even in the face of feeling disappointed, hurt or angry with them. Violent people have an extremely low tolerance for frustration and lose all emotional and psychological connection with anyone who is upsetting them. When that connective link is broken, people become objects to be destroyed in the same way as one might smash a tennis racket or golf club on the ground following a lousy shot. When violent people are disappointed, they react by shooting from their hip with no regard for consequences instead of pausing to think with their head and making the best decision possible.

Social factors include “learned violence.” Study after study shows that most child abusers were themselves abused as children. Most teens or adults who resort to violence personally experienced or witnessed violence in their homes. This teaches them the rather unfortunate lesson that violence and anger repeatedly win over logic and reason.

As long as their biological, psychological or social functioning is strong, the vast majority of people survive the slings and arrows of their fellow human beings without resorting to murder or mayhem. An individual doesn’t need to be strong in all three areas, but if they’re batting 0 for 3, it will take very little to trigger them to become violent.

III. GETTING AN UPSET TEENAGER TO CALM DOWN AND LISTEN TO REASON

A person can't actively listen and scream at the same time, and when they don't listen to you, get them to listen to them.

One of the key strategies in calming down an upset teenager you're having a conversation with is to repeat what they are saying to you in a calm and measured voice. This takes discipline and focus because your tendency is to react to people who are venting, blaming others, verbally attacking, etc., by become defensive, competitive or hostile toward them. This is a real tipping point in the conversation.

If a teenager is saying to you "I hate school, it's a bunch of bullsh-t, and nobody gives a damn", wait until they're completely finished and then calmly reply: "It's very important (just using the word "important" in connection with a person who is feeling unimportant is calming in itself) that I heard you correctly. (pause) So what you're saying is that you hate school, you think it's a bunch of bullsh-t, and you believe nobody gives a damn. Is that correct?"

When you do this, it forces the upset person to go from venting to listening. They will begin to listen at the speed you are talking and will be drawn to listening, because you're repeating what they told you. This demonstrates that you are listening to them and you feel that what they're saying is important. That helps to reduce their experience of smallness, unimportance and powerlessness (that can fuel impotent rage).

If they resist and say, "You're just trying to make fun of me" or "I'm not going to listen to anything you say," repeat back to them in a calm, but determined voice, "This really is TOO important for

me to have not correctly heard what you said, because if I didn't, it will be more difficult to figure out what we can do to make things better." Persist with this approach until they begin to listen.

Violent people have an extremely low tolerance for frustration and lose all emotional and psychological connection with anyone who is upsetting them.

It's important not to have a passive aggressive, baiting or ridiculing tone in your voice, but to assume a true inquiring attitude to sincerely check if you have heard them correctly.

If they tell you that you didn't hear them correctly, ask them to correct what you've said and then repeat the corrected phrase back to them.

After you have repeated it correctly and they have agreed with what you say, you have not only caused them to listen, you have also caused them to say "yes" to you in their mind which begins to ease them away from the hostile and agitated "no" in their head.

What you have just done is moved the teenager from acting from his reptilian lower brain, (the "acting out", fight or flight part of the brain) up to his mammalian midbrain, which expresses itself through verbally venting, but not by physical action or violence. When they verbally vent you can think of their coming from their left midbrain (Left because that is the verbal side of the brain).

What you want to do next is empathize with them and shift them from their left (verbal, but logical) midbrain to their right (emotional) midbrain. Do that by saying something like: “And when you say it’s all a bunch of bullshit it’s because you’re not just frustrated, you’re furious. Isn’t that true?” By empathizing with their emotional mid-brain you will have succeeded in helping them feel less alone.

At this point, if they agree with you and say “Yes” they are starting to calm down their overheated midbrain.

Psychologist Mathew Lieberman at UCLA has recently demonstrated that just attaching a word to an emotion, naming and saying it, significantly lowers amygdala activation. Amygdala activation is what leads to increased emotionality which in turn leads to an increased tendency to act out. Dan Goleman, the first person to coin the term “emotional intelligence”, refers to this process of the amygdala becoming so overly activated that it causes people to react from their more immature animal brains as an “amygdala hijack”.

To make use of this phenomenon and further calm them down, follow your comments up with a question such as “How furious are you?”

If you can get them to say something like: “So furious that I could (vs. am going to) destroy something,” that will further calm their midbrain.

And then saying, “I understand,” instead to getting into a debate with them, will further calm them down.

After you have them listening to reason and functioning from their emotional, mammalian midbrain, you want to help facilitate their functioning from the more human, rational upper brain referred to as the neocortex.

You can do that by asking them: “Do you really believe what you are saying, and if so, why?”, or “It’s also very important for me to know what has caused you to feel and think that way

so we can see what might be done to make things better. So tell me: you hate your job, think it's a bunch of bullshit, and think that nobody gives a damn because..."

Asking someone to fill in the blank as in the last phrase, "and think that nobody gives a damn because..." " validates their thoughts and feelings, is more inviting and less confrontational than asking a question such as: "Why do you hate your job and why do you think it's a bunch of bullshit?"

Finally, to move them from thinking to solving their problem with you, say: "You probably won't be able to get everything you want—because nobody does—but let's try to find a way to get you what you need. So what you want is..."

Let them fill in the blank, pause and repeat back to them: "And you want that, because..." Again, let them again fill in the blank, pause and repeat that back to them, followed by: "Hmm, I understand." Then pause and reiterate, "Okay that's what you want; let's figure out what it is you actually need." From this point, hopefully they will have calmed down sufficiently to enter into a constructive dialogue about getting what they need.

By using this conversational tool you have led the person away from their animal reflex attack mode into listening, and from listening into thinking about what they're saying, and when they do that they will begin to calm down and if you're patient they will begin to listen to reason.

IV. TALK OUT YOUR GRIEF AND YOU'LL BEGIN TO HEAL

The second longest wait in life is the time it takes for angst from a tragedy to turn into grief; the longest wait in life is the time it takes for grief to turn into wisdom.

The tragedy at Virginia Tech was such a devastating loss to those closely affected by it (and even some that were not) that it created an emotional abscess. Like an actual abscess, such a wound

cannot be fully healed with antibiotics or by putting a bandage over it. To heal completely it needs to be drained completely. To clean this wound to their hearts and souls, they will need to feel and express, and then pause and feel and express again, until they have drained the pain completely.

This will not be easy. Once you begin to grieve over a certain tragedy, you risk opening the flood-gates to unfelt, unexpressed and unhealed inner angst from other traumatic events in your life. Yet sharing your feelings with people who can relate based on their own similar experiences can be extremely valuable during the recovery process. This explains why women with breast cancer are so effectively helped by “Reach to Recovery” groups, and why the group experience is the foundation of Alcoholics Anonymous recovery programs.

If you’ve experienced trauma or tragedy, you’ll need to open the door to your own process of emotional excavation, healing and rebuilding, and begin to talk in great detail with others about what you saw and heard, thought and felt, as you watched the tragedy of this awful event unfold.

Also use the following 10 signposts as a guide:

1. Cry
2. Scream
3. Shriek
4. Reach out to others
5. Reach into yourself
6. Sob
7. Take a deep breath
8. Whimper
9. Rest
10. *Repeat the above as often as needed until you know that you’ll make it through.*

V. *THE MEASURE OF A CIVILIZATION*

**The measure of a civilization at war is how it treats those who have hurt it;
The measure of a civilization in peace is how it treats those who are hurting in it.**

[U.S. Military Dead in Iraq : 3,333](#)

[U.S. Military Wounded/Mutilated in Iraq: 24,314](#)

[Incomplete List Of Contractors Dead in Iraq: 393 \(incomplete list\)](#)

[Journalists Dead in Iraq: 117 \(incomplete list\)](#)

[Iraqi Civilians Dead: 62,281](#)

[Child Abuse: 2006 report from 2004 data: 3,000,000 alleged abused or neglected; 872,000 confirmed](#)

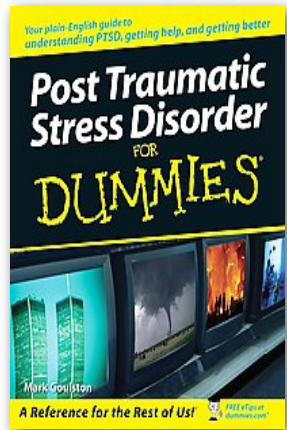
[Child Abuse: 2005 report from 2003 data: 2,900,000 alleged abused or neglected; 906,000 confirmed](#)

[Child Abuse: 2004 report from 2002 data: 1,800,000 alleged abused or neglected; 896,000 confirmed](#)

[2005 National Crime Victimization Survey: 191,670 victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assaults](#)

[The Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress \(February 2007\): 754,000 homeless on any given night in the United States](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Goulston, M.D. is a Los Angeles based psychiatrist and the author of: [Get Out of Your Own Way](#) (Perigee, 1996), [Get Out of Your Own Way at Work](#) (Perigee, 2006) and [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for Dummies](#) (Dummies, 2007). For more information visit: <http://markgoulston.com> or Mark's blog at: <http://markgoulston.com/blog>. Contact Mark at: mgoulston@markgoulston.com.

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