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CAPTURING THE EXTRAORDINARY



Every article in *Psychology Today* explores the complexities of the human brain in some capacity, but few tackle the subject as directly as this issue's cover story, "7 Extraordinary Feats Your Brain Can Perform," which highlights some remarkable, if little-known, abilities. Creating a cover image that turns the abstract into the visually concrete was the task of Barcelona-based illustrator **Luci Gutiérrez**. Her experience working with complex arrangements was ideal for capturing a story that couldn't be reduced to just one theme, and her energetic style helped lend the composition its air of impossibility. The dynamic and colorful drawings—of objects like keys, cards, and clocks—were superimposed on a portrait taken by New York-based photographer **Celeste Sloman**.

Gutiérrez, whose work has been featured in *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Boston Globe*, as well as in several books, says she aimed for a composition that was "fun, bright, and witty." The various everyday objects, she adds, lend themselves to a playful, non-literal interpretation of the story's heady themes of cognition, emotion, and memory. "An illustration shouldn't represent exactly what the text says," she observes.

**"A visual narrative works in a different way than does a written narrative. It has its own language."**

For Gutiérrez, her own "art language"—which tends towards the surreal, the cartoonish, and the whimsical—has never been an intentional choice. "My drawings just come out this way," she says. "Drawing, to me, is a way to talk—it's a way to express a point of view that I'm not able to convey otherwise."



"For human beings, being able to predict and explain other people's behavior is everything," says psychologist and writer **Jesse Bering, Ph.D.**—which is why the apparent randomness of suicide terrifies us so much. The author's curiosity about his own suicidal feelings, which first appeared in his teen years, was a driving force behind his book *Suicidal* ("Web of Despair"), but he was also drawn in by philosophical and evolutionary questions, he says. **"With suicide seeming—at least on the surface—to contradict Darwinian principles, my writing this book was unavoidable."**



Whether creating virtual reality for Disney or combating terrorism as an intelligence officer for the NSA, neuroscientist **Eric Haseltine, Ph.D.**, has always been intrigued by how our brains solve problems—and how they can do so more effectively. **"It's not true that we use only 10 percent of our brain. We use 100 percent of it. We just don't use it right,"** he says. In "7 Extraordinary Feats Your Brain Can Perform," he wants readers to open their eyes to the versatility hidden in their brains—and maybe even start to believe the impossible: "There is more ability inside each of us than we can ever imagine."



Individuals with borderline personality disorder can wear on loved ones and on the professionals tasked with treating them, and face added stigma from the media. Illustrator **Gérard Dubois** ("Tangled in Turmoil") aimed to portray this condition and its challenges without contributing further to the difficulties sufferers face. "I tried to create images that are universal," he says. **"You don't see their face or their expression—and you don't see right away that something's wrong."** That universality is, he hopes, a trigger for empathy—and the realization that those who have BPD are often their own worst enemy.



**"I'm a big fan of being proactive—and the sooner you bring support and services to troubled students, the less likely things will end in violence,"** says lawyer **Carolyn Reinach Wolf**. Much of her NYC-based practice is dedicated to assisting families as they navigate the confusing mental health-care system, but she also works with schools to help them identify and support students with emotional or social challenges. "Prevention, Not Reaction" confronts the unfortunate, and seemingly growing, need to head off potential shooters. She notes, "These incidents were all kind of obvious—if people had known what to look for."

PHOTO OF LUCI GUTIÉRREZ BY ISOMA UELAND



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SOLUTIONS



COMPOSITE: SHUTTERSTOCK, ISTOCKPHOTO

## Prevention, Not Reaction

How to protect schools from mass shootings.  
**BY CAROLYN REINACH WOLF**

**U** **NSURPRISINGLY**, Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year-old gunman charged in the February 2018 Parkland, Florida, mass shooting that killed 17 people, had disciplinary issues dating back to middle school. He reportedly killed neighborhood animals with a pellet

gun in his early teens, wrote a racial epithet and other seriously concerning statements on his backpack, and acquired his first real gun at 18—the age a person can legally buy one in Florida. According to the *Miami Herald*, the summer before the massacre he even told a coworker's mother that, having been expelled, he might just shoot people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

School shooters often fit a consistent profile, regardless of whether they target K-12 or college campus settings. Shooters are overwhelmingly Caucasian and male, in their mid-teens to early twenties. They have a history of disciplinary problems stemming from aggressive, disrespectful, and antisocial behavior. These young men show a strong affinity for guns and violence, frequently fixating on and lionizing the perpetrators of past atrocities, from the Holocaust to Columbine. What's more, they're not secretive about their fascinations. They describe violent fantasies online and openly discuss them with peers, educators, and members of their communities.

How, then, do so many shooters routinely slip through the cracks of school systems? They go under the radar for lengthy periods. They take the time to plan, stockpile weapons, and even offer clues about their intentions—and ultimately carry out elaborate, deadly massacres. Time and time again, there are signs, but the signs are truly obvious and unmistakable only in retrospect. Journalists have even reported that in some shootings, students in the community have successfully guessed the identity of the perpetrator(s) before details were released or confirmed.

Yet, even when school communities know of the young people in crisis, there's a failure to intervene.

Many factors contribute to the challenges schools face in identifying and seeking help for would-be shooters. Educators are often reluctant to share details with law enforcement, families, and administrators about seriously troubled students for fear of violating privacy laws that protect educational records and medical information. While health and safety



### **Even when schools identify mentally ill students with “red flag” behaviors, administrators can't request additional information from clinicians who treat them.**



exemptions to these laws make it perfectly legal to disclose otherwise confidential information if students are suspected of being a danger to themselves or others, compliance-focused school cultures do not encourage educators to take the perceived risk of violating privacy.

Adding to these challenges are the restrictions that come into play when students turn 18 and become adults. At this point, schools often lose the ability to provide even

concerned parents with details about their child's health and academic status, which often serve as bellwethers for emotional problems. When a student develops worrisome behavior while at college—with the rights and independence of a legal adult—parents are often the last to know.

What's more, specific statutes in federal antidiscrimination laws protect the rights of persons with disabilities, including students of any age suffering from mental illness. These laws enable qualified students—those with a disability—to request equal opportunity to participate in an educational institution's programs, activities, and services. However, these laws also limit the information a school may demand from students, their families, or mental health professionals. Even when schools identify previously diagnosed mentally ill students exhibiting “red flag” behaviors, administrators cannot request additional information from clinicians who treat these students, unless the details directly relate to a specific request, such as special housing or additional time for exams. The full release of medical records is rarely ever permissible, making it even more challenging for schools to appropriately identify and intervene when students are in crisis.

Practical realities are just as difficult to navigate. It's not easy to force an adult-size person to do things he doesn't want to do, whether he is legally an adult or not. Add mental health problems that spur challenging behavior and limit self-awareness, and it makes sense that schools might struggle to connect troubled young people with needed mental health resources. If the only recourse is

contacting law enforcement—which could mean imprisonment or, at the very least, a permanent record—it’s understandable that educators might delay taking action.

Adolescence is not a time known for rational behavior and self-awareness; teenagers and young adults can often be self-destructive, impulsive, and inappropriate. Mental health challenges, from depression and anxiety to high levels of stress, are becoming increasingly common in young people today. Social media platforms are an added complication, offering students a means of publicly disclosing disturbing thoughts and feelings that other generations might have aired only privately. Educators rightly pause when determining what to do as warning signs surface.

#### TOWARD A NEW PROTOCOL

To overcome these challenges, schools need protocols that go further than just reacting and responding to existing dangers. Starting at the highest administrative levels, schools must commit to preventive approaches that help identify the earliest indications of a student in crisis rather than wait for signs of an impending assault. They must choose to be proactive versus reactive.

In both K-12 and college campus settings, effective prevention of school shootings begins with the creation of multidisciplinary threat-assessment teams to identify at-risk individuals. These teams must receive training, meet regularly, and utilize established protocols for tracking “red flag” behaviors.

Preventive models should recognize these early warning signs, then ring the necessary alarms, triggering

team members to conduct immediate investigations, perform a threat assessment, and determine the best methods for intervention, community notification, and response.

The very best preventive threat-assessment protocols go further than identifying would-be shooters; they assess each situation with an eye toward seeking early and appropriate treatment as well as engaging families. This rehabilitative, rather than disciplinary, approach welcomes formerly at-risk individuals

**It should be possible to speak up without necessarily destroying a young person’s educational prospects or ultimate life goals.**

back into school, as appropriate, once benchmarks measuring progress are met. Beyond being therapeutically appropriate and compassionate, this approach encourages peers, teachers, professors, deans, coaches, and others to report concerning behavior. Speaking up becomes possible without necessarily destroying a young person’s educational prospects or ultimate life goals.

For example, a major university championing the use of a behavioral intervention team identified a sophomore through their campus-wide

reporting system. The student wrote consistently about seeking revenge in response to bullying. The team recommended that the university counseling center reach out to the student, offering an evaluation and possible treatment plan. Because the student was agreeable to this, the university allowed him to remain on campus with ongoing intervention and some oversight. He graduated in 2015 with no incidents of violence or other alarming behavior reported.

Following a school shooting, administrators often pour their energy into reactive efforts like shortening emergency response times, hiring additional security, and honing active-shooter drills. That’s natural—focusing on these measures offers a greater sense of control. However, recent shooting incidents make it clear that such measures are not enough. Many of these schools had armed officers, well-rehearsed crisis protocols, and even systems in place for reporting behavior that constituted a threat. All of these precautions failed to save the lives of students and educators.

Current measures can reduce casualties and save lives. However, they must be paired with proven preventive approaches to ensure the safety of a school community, long before the alarms ring and emergency responders arrive. The rationale for additional, proactive, preventive measures is worth repeating: When a student enters a school with a gun, and an intent to kill, it’s already too late.

**CAROLYN REINACH WOLF** is a family-focused mental health attorney at the law firm *Abrams Fensterman*.