

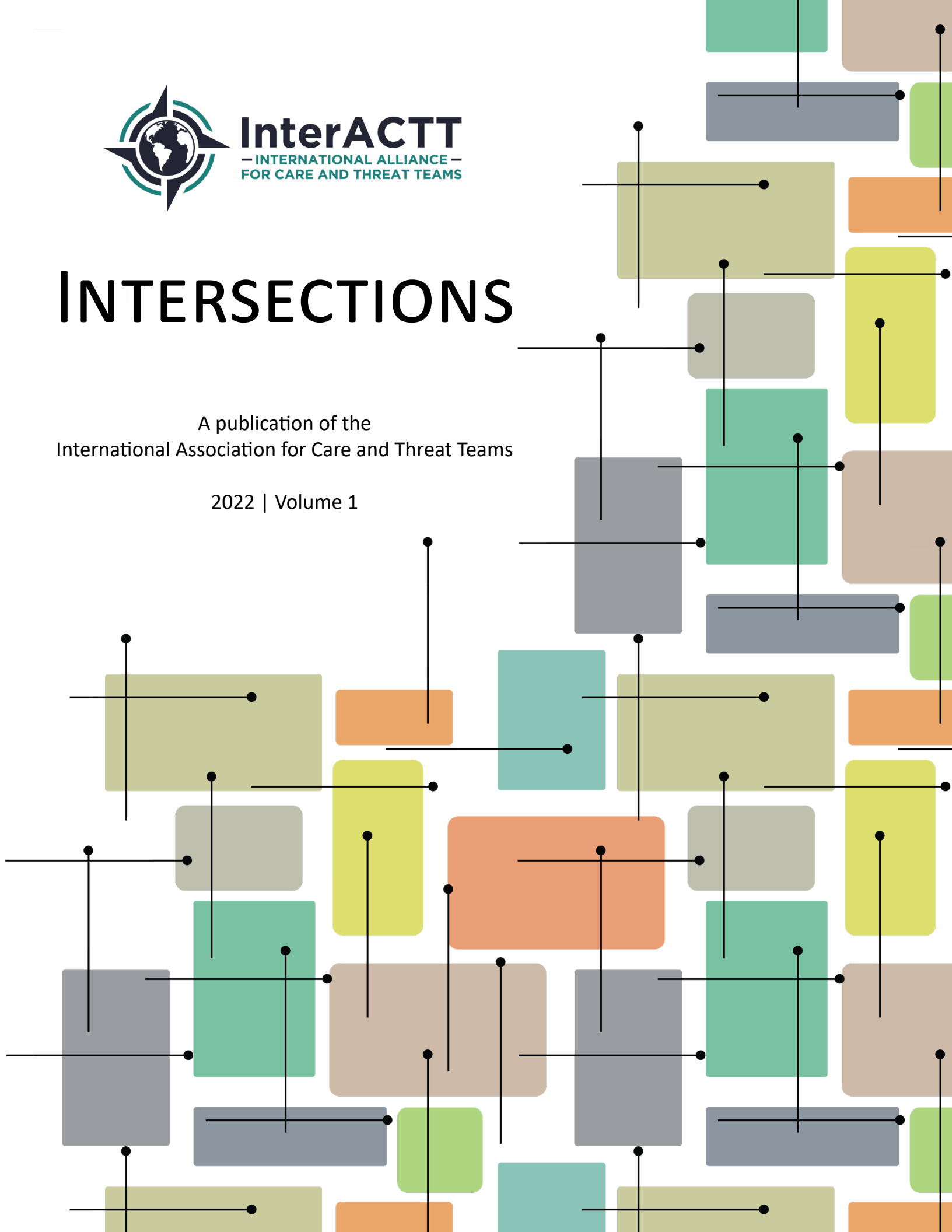


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Beyond the Red Flags

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Abstract

Early identification of red flags and at-risk behavior is a research-based best practice in the prevention of targeted violence. This article expands on this foundational concept and describes how to fill gaps in targeted violence prevention by moving beyond red flags. The authors describe five critical concepts related to behavioral intervention and threat assessment work in schools, workplaces, and communities that are commonly missed or underutilized. Diverse, multidisciplinary, collaborative teams remain the central place for the identification of red flag behaviors. However, this article identifies missed opportunities in the utilization of these teams in current practice as well as the singular focus on target hardening of facilities instead of collaborative violence risk and threat assessment. The authors also discuss the common labeling of attackers after incidents of violence and how this can contribute to future inaction in terms of seeking help, reporting concerns, and intervening when someone is evolving toward violence. The article further explores the problematic practice of focusing generally and broadly on mental health as a risk factor for violence and how this can result in missing other red flags, stigmatizing seeking help for mental health, and over-reliance on mental health assessments instead of a more comprehensive violence risk or threat assessment. Last, behavioral intervention and threat assessment team processes can be improved by incorporating red teaming techniques, dynamic risk assessment, and on-going connections to individuals of concern.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the shootings in Buffalo, NY, and Uvalde, TX, a collective chatter about red flags began on the 24-hour news cycle. Requests for mental health experts to address the warning signs of the active shooter. Critiques of law enforcement responses. The back-and-forth debate on gun control.

For decades, there has been an increasing focus on identifying the ‘red flags’ that are present in the attacker: injustice collecting,¹ being the target of teasing and bullying,² making substantive threats,³ experiencing suicidal ideation and hopelessness,⁴ radicalization to extremist viewpoints,⁵ and a dozen others. Identifying these red flags prior to an attack is good, particularly when they are based on research and do not contribute to violence myths such as those with mental illness are dangerous or playing violent videos increases the likelihood of moving further down the pathway of violence.⁶ Early identification of red flags is an important part of the equation to thwart mission-oriented attackers. But it is not enough.

When these unbelievably sickening, cold-blooded killings occur, there is a reasonable reaction to see those who engage in such hellish behavior as evil monsters. It is within our nature to look at the horror of these attacks and attribute qualities to the attacker that are equally other-worldly and terrifying. The killings, however, are carried out by those who are more like us than different from us. While labeling them as ‘evil’ and ‘monsters’ casts a reassuring distance between them and us, it also disempowers school administrators, counselors, teachers, and law enforcement from engaging in efforts designed to stop the escalation of those potential attackers. We become disenfranchised and believe nothing we do will stop an evil monster bent on killing. That is not correct.

Instead, we must move beyond the monsters and red flags. We must see those who commit these actions as anyone of us pushed, twisted, and prodded to this last, desperate, and destructive action. We must understand the motivations for these attacks, identify the red flag behaviors occurring around us, take decisive action to stop the escalation, and encircle the individual with the appropriate scaffolding to move them off their pathway toward violence and instead to a more connected and supported experience. Moving beyond red flags means continuing to advance the research-based work of collaborative teams, avoiding the singular focus on target hardening or mental health diagnosis, increasing the use of threat or violence risk assessments over psychological assessments, incorporating red teaming into processes to identify vulnerabilities, and committing to continuous risk assessments and ongoing threat management.

Collaborative Teams

Numerous fields of study, including psychology, education, and security studies, have looked at the issue of targeted and mission-oriented violence and have come to the same conclusion about the solution. K-12 schools, colleges, universities, and workplaces should implement diverse, multidisciplinary, collaborative teams to identify concerning behaviors early and implement strategies to reduce the triggers for escalation and increase protective, supportive, and mitigating elements around the individual at risk. Several quotes are included in Table 1 to highlight the importance of these teams.

1 O’Toole M.E. (2000). *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

2 National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC). (2019). *Protecting America’s schools: A United States Secret Service analysis of targeted school violence*. United States Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

3 Cornell, D. (2010). Threat Assessment in the College Setting. *Change Magazine*, 42 (1), 9-15.

4 Lankford, A. (2018). Identifying Potential Mass Shooters and Suicide Terrorists with Warning Signs of Suicide, Perceived Victimization, and Desires for Attention or Fame. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 100 (5), 1–12.

5 Van Brunt, B., Murphy, A., & Zedginidze, A. (2017). An exploration of the risk, protective, and mobilization factors related to violent extremism in college populations. *Violence and Gender* 4, (3), 81-101.

6 Meloy J, Hoffmann J, Guldemann A, James D. (2012). The role of warning behaviors in threat assessment: An exploration and suggested typology. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 30 (3), 256–279.

Table 1 Support for Collaborative Teams

“The first step in developing a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan is to establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team of individuals who will direct, manage, and document the threat assessment process.” ⁷
“Colleges and universities need to implement threat assessment teams. These teams are essential to identifying threats, reviewing the nature of the threat, and mitigating the risk.” ⁸
“...adoption of policies and programs to support targeted violence prevention efforts, <i>establishment of threat assessment and management teams</i> , and education to underscore the importance of these processes and to promote acceptance and engagement by all.” ⁹
“Behavioral intervention teams are small groups of school officials who meet regularly to collect and review concerning information about at-risk community members and develop intervention plans to assist them.” ¹⁰

Teams should be made up of eight to ten members from various departments and meet weekly to review cases. The team collects concerns from the community through phone calls, face-to-face conversations, emails, and online reports. The team is marketed and advertised to the community to ensure they receive concerns from both marginalized groups and those who commonly voice concerns.

These teams should not be punitive in nature but rather consultative to the various departments that will take direct action in a particular case (e.g., police, school counseling, psychological counseling, student conduct, and/or case management). Likewise, these teams are most effective when they have buy-in from community stakeholders as well as a shared commitment to meeting regularly rather than approaching risk management as a “one and done” response. They bring together the collective wisdom of those around the table and work best when they leave ego, rank, and hierarchy at the door. To borrow a psychological term, the team is a gestalt; it becomes more than the sum of its parts.

There are many practical examples of schools and workplaces failing to address at-risk behavior through a collaborative team approach. In each example, a single perspective (police, counselor, administrator) addresses the issue instead of drawing from multiple sources of information and expertise, limiting the scope and effectiveness of the response. Table 2 highlights examples of missed opportunities when a collaborative team is not used.

7 National Threat Assessment Center (2018). *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

8 Van Brunt, B. (2012). *Ending Campus Violence: New Approaches to Prevention*. Routledge.

9 Amman, M., Bowlin, M., Buckles, L., Burton, K.C., Brunnell, K.F., Gibson, K.A., Griffin, S.H., Kennedy, K. & Robins, C.J.. (2015). *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks*. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

10 Van Brunt, B., Schiemann, M., Pescara-Kovach, L., Murphy, A., Halligan-Avery, E. (2018). Standards for Behavioral Intervention Teams. *Journal of Campus Behavioral Intervention*, (6). National Association for Behavioral Intervention and Threat Assessment.

Table 2 Common “Misses” When Collaborative Teams Are Not Used

Missed Opportunity	Example
Police are called into a case when it escalates, and they determine they cannot act because a crime has not been committed.	A student engages in bullying and harassing behavior toward other classmates in an ongoing manner over the course of many weeks. Police are finally called when it exceeds the teacher’s ability to manage the class.
A counselor or psychologist is called into a case to evaluate an employee who has made a threat or displays other mission-oriented red flags.	An employee displays injustice collecting behavior, makes women in the office uncomfortable, brags about a collection of weapons, and is referred for a mental health evaluation by human resources instead of a violence risk assessment.
An administrator reviews concerns related to a student’s harmful debate and vague threats as a free speech issue.	A student displays hardened points of view, frequently “baiting” and “trolling” others in the classroom on issues they hold strongly. The student in question often talks of Naziism, how homosexual professors should be put to death by the government, and how abortion would never be a problem if women kept their legs shut.

Collaborative teams are also only as effective as the referrals they receive, meaning it is imperative to make reporting to the team easy and safe for students, families, and other stakeholders. Let’s pause here with the simple attribute of a team’s name. In the state of Texas, all K12 school districts are required in law to have “behavioral threat assessment teams” as a centralized place for identifying individuals who may pose threats and provide interventions before violence or other concerning behaviors occur. In several recent incidents, individuals lived in family homes before the acts of violence. Would a family member concerned about their own student feel safe reporting to this team? The name unintentionally sounds punitive in nature and communicates that a threat must exist for the team to be involved. In fact, the state of Texas now uses the name Safe and Supportive School team instead. We must help families see these collaborative teams as helpful points of contact ready to support them in navigating the complexities of what is occurring with their students. While some aspects of the family may be contributing to the instability of the student’s environment, it only takes one family member to alert the team about a concern. Teams, along with the team’s name, must better communicate the intention of offering support, connections, and access to resources to help eliminate obstacles to receiving reports.

Balance Target Hardening with Collaborative Teams

Most schools, colleges, and universities lean heavily on physical security measures such as surveillance cameras, fencing, ballistic glass, and metal detectors. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent on physical security measures and technology, offering what feels like a blanket of comfort to students and families. These efforts make institutions “feel safe,” but in many instances, they have fallen short as the only or best solution to prevent attacks. Renowned threat assessment experts Calhoun and Weston have researched this approach, dubbing it the “bunker mentality.”¹¹ Focusing only on physical security or target hardening may actually make us less safe, as research shows that we tend to relax inside the protection of physical security and become complacent to other risks.

An example of over-dependency or reliance on technology for security includes both World Trade Center attacks. In the first attack on the World Trade Center on February 26th, 1993, a truck full of explosives was detonated in the underground parking facility killing six people. Our response to this attack was physical security through

11 Calhoun, F. S. & Weston, S.W. (2016). Perspectives on threat management. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 2 (3-4), 258-267.

target hardening. Facility enhancements included thousand-pound concrete planters placed around buildings, an increased number of closed-circuit television cameras, and added security teams with bomb-sniffing dogs. These were all tangible security measures; they made people feel safe as they were prominent and visible every day as people came and went from the towers.

This concept is driven home more when you consider the shooting in Parkland, Florida. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School had specialized glass designed to withstand a hurricane. The attacker fired 16 rounds from a third-floor stairwell where he had an elevated vantage point on the crowd below. The glass was impenetrable by the attacker, and this did save lives. In this instance, that security measure worked, but ultimately Parkland was a catastrophic failure, including the response to red flags and the use of threat assessment.

There are too many examples of schools, colleges, universities, and workplaces that adopt a “bunker mentality” approach to safety. This typically occurs as a conclusion to thinking the attackers are unpredictable, evil monsters, and our best hope is to create a target that is unattractive to them. If a facility is sufficiently hardened with bullet-resistant glass, armed security, a locked front gate, and reinforced steel classroom doors, there is a belief this will be enough to deter an attacker.

And there is a truth to this. Let’s acknowledge that. The problem lies in the singular focus on target hardening as the answer to this security question. While helpful in reducing access and killings, it is more effective to stop the attacker before they ever show up at the school, college, or workplace. Having a multidisciplinary team, along with physical security measures, is critical.

Lose the “Evil Monsters” Reference

As we listened to the press conference following the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, the authors were struck immediately by the language used by Texas Governor Greg Abbott.

“Evil swept across Uvalde yesterday. Anyone who shoots his grandmother in the face has to have evil in his heart. But It is far more evil for someone to gun down little kids. It is intolerable and unacceptable for us to have in our state anybody who would kill little kids in our schools.”

Let’s start here: this attacker, like all others, is solely responsible for his choices and his actions. There is no apology for them or an attempt to assign blame to others. However, they are not monsters. They are not evil. They are people. They are our sons, grandsons, friends, and students. They found themselves on a path spiked with insurmountable challenges. They see no hope, no future. Their path is linear, and they see no other alternative.

Labeling attackers as monsters and evil is not a uniquely Texan occurrence. A simple internet search finds examples of similar language describing mass shooters. A judge in the Parkland shooting case had to rule that witnesses and the prosecution could not call the attacker “an animal” or “that thing” during the trial.¹² The attacker in the 2015 massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, was referred to as a monster and “the incarnation of unadulterated evil.”¹³ The Columbine High School attackers were also referred to as monsters.¹⁴

It’s natural to see the actions of school shooters as evil and monstrous; they have done something beyond our ability to process. But the jump to dehumanizing their behavior and defining them as objects increases our

12 Spencer, T. (2021, September 3). Parkland school shooting suspect can’t be called ‘animal’. ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/parkland-school-shooting-suspect-called-animal-79816645>

13 Rudnik, N. (2015). Dylann Roof: The Perfectly Human Monster. *Valdosta Today*. <https://valdostatoday.com/news-2/local/2015/06/rudnik-dylann-roof-the-perfectly-human-monster/>

14 Bowden, M. (2009). The Point: Columbine: The work of a real monster. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. www.inquirer.com/philly/opinion/currents/20090614_The_Point__Columbine__The_work_of_a_real_monster.html

fear and impacts our ability to act. We are left either throwing up our hands in frustration at these random, uncontrollable, evil monsters or forced to hide in our hardened bunkers.

Why should we care about how we talk about these attackers? It is a fair question. They certainly didn't care about the others they mercilessly killed. We should care because seeing them as monsters is profoundly disempowering to reducing violent attacks. This language influences how the attackers are seen and reduces our ability to focus on and adopt practices that can truly prevent violent behavior. The list below highlights some specific concerns:

1. Most attackers share information about their attack plan prior to the attack. They may share this with friends or family. It is supremely difficult for friends and family to fathom that someone they love and hold close could contain this kind of monstrous evil. So, when it comes time for a friend or family member to share a concern based on something they heard, saw, or learned about their loved one's potential for this kind of violence, they now must overcome the concept: "Well, only evil monsters do this. Kyle isn't an evil monster, so he must be joking."
2. Researchers describe the attacker as being on the pathway to violence.¹⁵ In other words, someone evolves toward this violence. They do not spontaneously snap and carry out an attack. When we characterize individuals as monsters, we miss out on helping our communities understand how someone evolves toward violence. We also overlook how our communities, schools, and families contribute to risk factors for violent behaviors.
3. Those who assess risk in a professional capacity do so by balancing the interplay between risk and protective factors, flowing between red flags and stabilizing supports in the potential attacker's life. When it is accepted that attackers are evil monsters, it feeds directly into two concerning conclusions in their minds. The first is this: "If I am feeling the same things other attackers are, and they are monsters, then I am a monster." This exacerbates a key problem experienced by those on this pathway toward violence. They see themselves as different, broken, and apart from others. Connecting them to evil monsters further escalates this belief. The second related concept is this: "If I am truly an evil monster, then nothing will change. I have no salvation." They see themselves as without hope, as the wretched and discarded, as the fallen angel, forever separated from the light. In the case of the Dawson College shooting in 2006, the attacker referred to himself just this way on a website profile before the attack: "His name is Trench. You will come to know him as the Angel of Death."¹⁶

It's Not Mental Illness

Let's remember that just like other aspects of physical health, mental health exists with a diversity of concerns. We do not want to further stigmatize seeking help for mental health support or talking about mental health concerns by connecting this in such a broad way to violent behavior. Moreover, when we see mental health concerns as scary or problematic, we further isolate those with these concerns. Isolation and lack of connection are more concerning risk factors for violence than a mental health diagnosis by itself. Certainly, access to mental health counseling and treatment is an important aspect of intervening with those at risk, but it's not the only type of intervention needed. In fact, those reviewing reports of concerns in our schools or workplaces should be trained that the true nature of understanding the risk and concern with an individual is in using a more comprehensive violence risk or threat assessment and not just a mental health assessment.

15 Meloy, R., Hoffmann, J., Roshdi, K., Glaz-Ocik, J. & Guldemann, A. (2014). Warning behaviors and their configurations across various domains of targeted violence. In J.R. Meloy and J. Hoffman (Eds.), *The international handbook of threat assessment* (1st ed.) pp. 39–53. Oxford University Press.

16 CBC News (2006). Montreal gunman called himself 'angel of death'. CBC News. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal-gunman-called-himself-angel-of-death-1.575133

While mental illness is often a central explanation for mass shootings, the presence of a mental health diagnosis should not be overemphasized as causal. It is one of many risk factors related to targeted violence.¹⁷ When conducting a violence risk assessment, mental illness should be seen as one risk factor combined with traditional threat factors, such as action and time imperative, fixation and focus, and transient or substantive threats. Certain symptoms related to mental illness are considered risk factors for targeted violence. These include hopelessness, social isolation, injustice collecting, and a hardened point of view. When considered outside of the context of other violence risk factors, the casual observer gets the impression that mental illness itself is the cause of these attacks.

Suicide and the corresponding hopelessness are consistent risk factors for targeted violence. While this should be considered in an assessment, the assumption that suicidal individuals are also planning to carry out a mass shooting is not accurate. Stress is another risk factor for targeted violence, and those with mental illness often experience stress related to their symptoms or when they stop taking their medication. While stress is an escalating factor for violence, the presence of a particular diagnosis is secondary to assessing an individual's experience, coping skills, and support.

In the end, the presence of a mental illness does not constitute a dangerous individual. Instead, the violence risk assessment should be a research-based assessment of the threat and violence risk factors along with a person's behavior, treatment compliance, social and peer supports, resiliency to stress, and access to crisis services.¹⁸

Mental health factors make up a small percentage of the overall risk factors related to violence risk. While important, these factors should not be over-emphasized, leading to under-emphasizing other violence risk factors. Mental health factors include depression, suicidality, psychosis and delusions, or substance use disorders. Violence risk factors include the presence of a direct threat and disturbing veiled threat, fixation and focus on target, action and time imperative, lack of empathy, social isolation, injustice collecting, marginalization, fantasy rehearsal, leakage, weapons access, hardened point of view, and feelings of persecution.

Stop Confusing Psychological with Threat/Risk Assessments

While this may seem a semantic difference to some, it is a misunderstanding that has cost lives. A psychological or mental health assessment is intended to 1) obtain a diagnosis or treatment plan for a mental illness, 2) determine a level of care such as day or inpatient treatment, 3) obtain medication, and/or 4) decide about fitness for duty or if a person is qualified for a particular job. A threat assessment is concerned with determining if a threat that has been made is transient or substantive and likely to be carried out. A violence risk assessment is a broader term describing the process by which a determination is made about the overall risk, with or without the presence of a threat to an individual or others.

To be fair, there are some areas of overlap between these three different assessments. This is because the assessment is often provided by a person who may have experience in one, two, or all three of these approaches. For further clarity, Table 3 offers some examples of overlap between the three assessments.

17 Langman P. (2017). A bio-psycho-social model of school shooters. *Journal of Campus Behavioral Intervention*, 5, 27–34.

Choe J, Teplin L, Abram K. (2008). Perpetration of violence, violent victimization, and severe mental illness: Balancing public health concerns. *Psychiatric Services*, 59 (2), 153–164.

18 Van Brunt, B. & Pescara-Kovach, L. (2018). Debunking the Myths: Mental Illness and Mass Shootings. *Journal of Violence and Gender*, 6 (1), 53-63.

Table 3 Reasonable Areas of Overlap

Overlap	Example
A psychological or mental health assessment may cross over into a violence risk assessment when looking at harm to self.	A student has made a suicidal statement or generally has a heightened risk and is referred for an assessment after a major loss.
A threat assessment may be better informed by understanding the context from a psychological or mental health assessment.	An employee makes a threat to a co-worker in reaction to ongoing teasing about his Asperger's/Autism Spectrum Disorder behavior.
A threat assessment may be a starting place to address a wider concern around mental illness treatment.	A student with schizophrenic symptoms who refuses treatment escalates when they directly threaten a teacher.
A violence risk assessment could be a deeper exploration into wider self-harm and harm to others following a threat assessment that may be transient in nature but provides an opportunity for further engagement.	An employee makes a threat in front of a supervisor, and the threat is used to justify a wider assessment of general concerns for their well-being and connect them to resources.

There are two questions to consider when a team or individual suggests, encourages, or requires a psychological or mental health assessment. This is called a Determination Query and would be used each time you are considering the type of assessment needed. Table 4 explains questions used to determine moving forward with a psychological or mental health assessment, a threat or violence risk assessment, or both.

Table 4 Determination Query

<p>Do we want to know if they have a diagnosable mental illness, if they require medication, or if they are in immediate need of commitment for their safety or the safety of others?</p> <p>[IF YES → move forward with psychological or mental health assessment]</p> <p>Do we want to know if they will act upon a verbal, written, or social media threat? If they have not made a threat in any of these ways, are we concerned they will kill other people if they continue without something changing?</p> <p>[IF YES → then you should move forward with a threat or violence risk assessment]</p>
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While a few individuals can balance both of these concepts and move between a violence risk assessment and a psychological assessment, this is a rare quality. More often, a psychological or mental health assessment is settled on because it is 1) easier, 2) more readily available, and 3) still allows the team or school to feel as if they are discharging their responsibility to take action and determine risk even though the intervention/referral is not the best practice in a given case.

Examine Your Process

Red teaming and *penetration testing* are widely used terms within the military community and are techniques with applicability to threat or violence risk assessments. Red teaming provides military leaders with an independent capability to fully explore alternatives in plans, operations, concepts, organizations, and capabilities in the

context of the operational environment. Penetration testing is a controlled attack simulation that helps identify weaknesses and breaches. You can implement defensive strategies to protect yourself by locating vulnerabilities before adversaries.

These concepts should be integrated into team operations and assessment processes by asking critical questions about risks and stabilizing factors, considering potential outcomes of interventions, identifying catalyst events, and forecasting actions should certain events occur, or supportive elements dissipate. Adapting these techniques helps prevent what we call “failure of imagination,” decreasing the possibility of a subject moving down the pathway of violence via a means that has not been thought of or protected against with a safety plan.

Working to reduce groupthink during this process is essential. We want to encourage others on the team to speak up, share their concerns, or stick to their guns when they firmly believe in an idea or concept, defending it appropriately. We must understand that we can make mistakes and learn from them, and communication is crucial in this process to avoid groupthink. We want to encourage our team to adopt an “investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset.”¹⁹

Continuous Risk Assessment

It would be recommended to see a person’s risk within a system as a dynamic, ever-changing characteristic. The risk would be seen as a state, not just a trait, in psychological jargon. Risk is contextual and expands and contracts depending on the environment around the person in question. For example, the risk may expand when a person is drinking, has lost their job, failed a class, or has been rejected by a romantic partner. The risk may contract when a person has the support of close friends and family, is able to put things into perspective, and retains a sense of hope for a better tomorrow.

Risk is like a river, ever-changing and in need of reassessment. When conducting a violence risk or threat assessment, it must be done with the knowledge that there is a very real shelf-life on the assessment of that risk. Say the student in question has numerous red flags for targeted violence but takes solace in their dog, Sparky. If Sparky is hit by a car, it would be reasonable for a team to *notice this fact and reassess the risk*. If a student is assessed at the early stages of their frustration around girls in their class rejecting their advances, the risk should be reassessed if the student begins to withdraw further from social connections, experiences rapid shifts in behavior (say from calm and shy to irritable and impulsive), and shares they have been talking online with a group of other frustrated individuals who “really get what I am going through.”

The challenge here is two-fold, as noted in the bold above. If the school, college/university, or workplace does not have a mechanism in place to notice the change in behavior, they do not have a trigger that would cause a reassessment of risk. And let us be clear here. We are not advocating some kind of *1984*, Orwellian, thought-police monitoring of the student, but rather a collaborative team that markets and advertises what they want to be shared forward by teachers, supervisors, co-workers, coaches, resident advisors, librarians, and facilities staff. Once the change in behavior or shift in risk level is observed, this should raise the question of how best to reassess the risk.

Violence Risk and Threat Management, Not Just Assessment

It is not enough to just assess the risk or threat; we also need to manage and mitigate the threat over time until the risk or threat is pacified. A common misstep for teams is to lean heavily on a single assessment of risk or threat and not engage in the process of continuous risk and threat management.

¹⁹ Vossekuil, B., Fein, R.A., Reddy, M., Borum, R. & Modzeleski, W. (2004). The final report and findings of the safe school initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States. United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education.

One approach to violence risk assessment that provides a solid example of how to do this well is Stephen Hart's work on Structured Professional Judgement (SPJ).²⁰ The structured professional judgment process can be outlined in seven steps: 1) gather information, 2) determine the presence of risk factors, 3) determine the relevance of risk factors, 4) develop a good formulation of violence risk, 5) develop scenarios of violence, 6) develop a case management plan based on those scenarios, and 7) develop conclusory opinions about violence risk.²¹

Imagine Raymond has been teased and bullied by other students and then makes a threat to kill the students teasing him after school. Table 5 offers a step-by-step process based on the SPJ model.

Table 5 SPJ Model for Threat Case

SJP Stage	Summary of Stage Based on Case Example	Example Questions Based on Case Example
Gather Information	Here we gather contextual information about the nature of the teasing and bullying that led up to the threat, where it occurred, and the previous relationship between those involved. We want to understand why and how the threat occurred and any relevant details about the history of those involved.	Who else are the students teasing? Have they done this before? What specifically did they say or do? What is the nature of the teasing (clothes, weight, friends, hygiene...). Where and when did the teasing happen? Were there cameras or surveillance video? Does this also occur online? Has the teasing and bullying resulted in physical violence?
Determine Risk Factors	There are several systems available for assessing the risk factors for targeted violence. Whichever is used, it is important the system is research-based and covers the full range of risk factors that are needed to properly assess the risk (e.g., nature of the threat, access to weapons, catalyst events...)	Was Raymond's threat more likely transient or substantive? Did it contain a specific reference to a time and place? Did the threat involve a weapon? Was the threat vague or direct? Did the threat contain a conditional ultimatum? Is Raymond impulsive? Is he suicidal? Does he fantasize about hurting the other students or just want to be left alone?
Relevance of Risk Factors	The risk factors should be weighed to determine their relevance to the case.	While a threat was made, is there a larger risk related to the suicidal potential for Raymond? Do teasing and bullying present a concerning problem in the school culture?
Formulation of Risk	The goal here is to understand the progression of the threat or incident to actual violence. While a clear threat may have been made, violence may be an unlikely outcome in the case.	Do the teasing and bullying raise the risk for targeted violence in this case? Are there other catalyst factors occurring in Raymond's life? Does this raise the likelihood of action?

20 Hart, S., & Logan, C. (2011). Formulation of violence risk using evidence-based assessment: The structured professional judgment approach. In P. Sturmey & M. McMurrin (Eds.), *Forensic case formulation*, pp. 83–106. Wiley-Blackwell.

21 Van Brunt, B. (2015). *Harm to Others: The Assessment and Treatment of Dangerousness*. American Counseling Association.

SJP Stage	Summary of Stage Based on Case Example	Example Questions Based on Case Example
Scenarios of Violence	This involves brainstorming potential violent outcomes that can be ranked from least likely to most likely. Interventions are then organized to reduce the most likely risk of escalation.	Raymond may act on the threat the next day with violence against those who bullied him. Raymond could commit suicide during the night after the threat. The teasing could continue and escalate, causing a more immediate violent response.
Case Management Plan	This step involves connecting resources directly to the most likely risks identified in the previous steps. This could involve services for Raymond and/or an educational approach for those involved in the teasing. Parental and/or guardian considerations should also be considered.	If a weapon was mentioned, is there a way to secure weapons so they cannot be accessed? Can Raymond receive support services from counseling or guidance? Can a bullying and teasing prevention program be implemented or updated in the school setting? Is there room for a mediated discussion between those who were leading the teasing and Raymond?

Too often, with our more complicated concerns, we tend to move toward transfer, removal, or separation. Our systems—schools, churches, medical facilities, workplaces, community services, and families—must move beyond a focus on those “in” our system. With employees, we offer time away, resignation options, or termination. Students can be suspended, given options to withdraw, allowed to drop out, or expelled. Patients are referred to others with greater expertise or scope of care. This can feel like a positive thing for the system but does not correlate with safety. When this occurs, the struggling individual often loses access to a source of stability and resources, such as access to mental health care and social interaction.

We are not suggesting that individuals should not be held accountable or removed from environments where behaviors impact others. Progressive accountability and discipline are important aspects of behavioral intervention. But when separations occur, these different institutions must go a step further to ensure that this does not create another gap the individual can fall into. There is a need for us to create some overlap across differing systems so that information is shared and transitions to new resources are more seamless. This is a resource-intensive and difficult goal, but if we can better share responsibilities for at-risk individuals, we have a greater opportunity to maintain long-term connection and management.

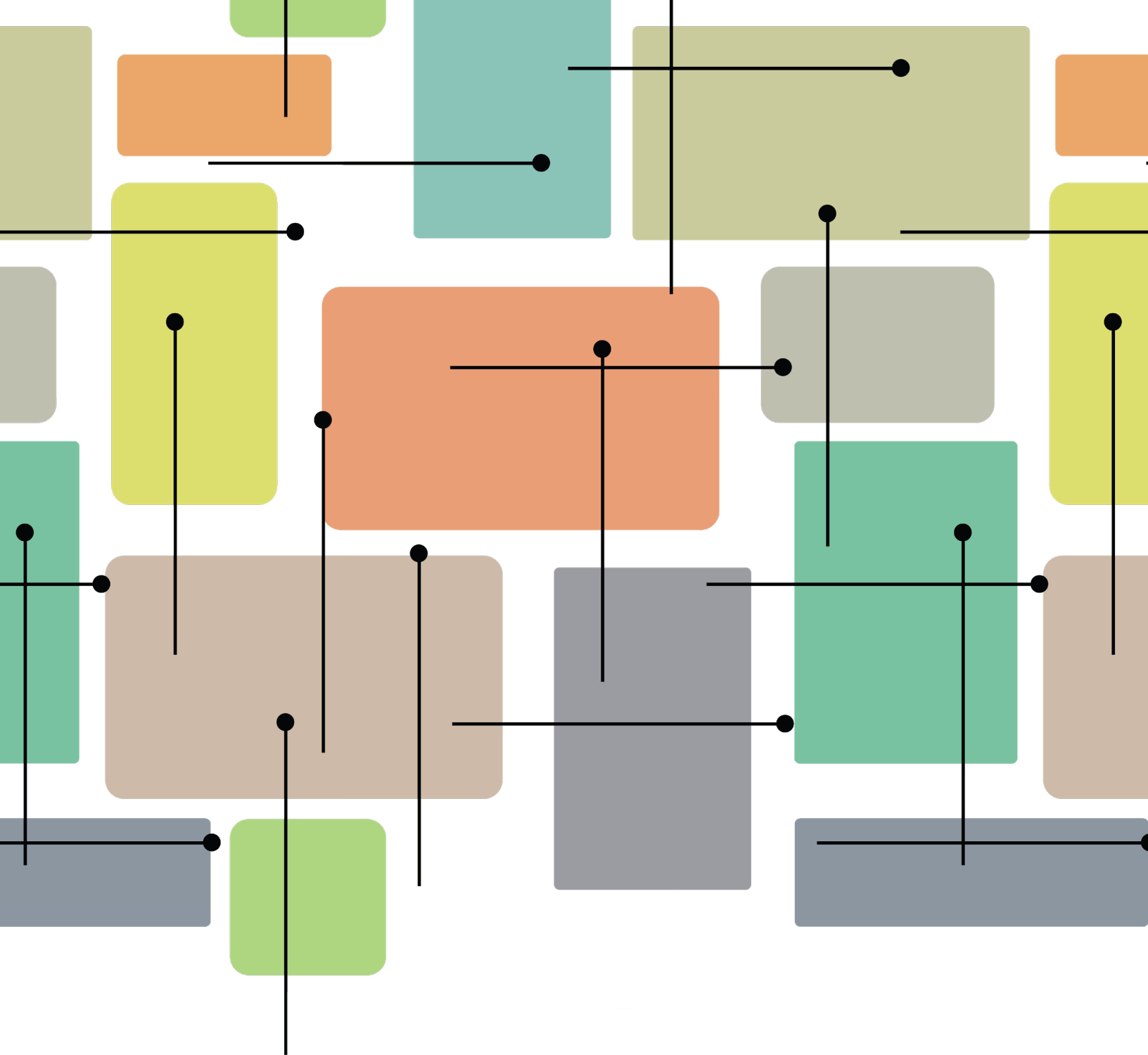
Conclusion

There has been a positive movement in understanding what motivates attackers and drives them forward on the pathway to violence. The general population’s broader understanding of the risk factors related to targeted and mission-oriented violence has increased. We have seen examples of community members sharing concerns with those in positions to act. We hope this article continues to move the field beyond identifying these red flags and toward mitigating and managing threats and risks.

Having worked in systems that are constantly asked to balance information and apply concepts to their overall risk management plans, we offer the final summary and discussion questions as a tool to push this dialogue forward and keep the discussion moving.

Go-Forward Items from Beyond the Red Flags

1. Approach threat and risk assessment from a diverse, multidisciplinary, collaborative team-based approach. Meet regularly (weekly or bi-weekly) with your team and work together on the cases to reduce silos and build a risk management plan that leans into the full expertise of the team.
2. Push back against the idea of seeing these attackers as monsters or evil. This disempowers reporting, increases fear, and often escalates those on the pathway to violence.
3. Understand the problem is not mental illness but rather the specific symptoms of hopelessness, desperation, and suicidality. Look for ways to both reduce risk factors and increase stabilizing influences and access to care to prevent mission-oriented violence.
4. Stop confusing mental illness and psychological assessments with violence risk and threat assessments. Choose the correct assessment based on the behaviors that are presented.
5. Be willing to examine your process and improve it. Do not let perfection be the enemy of the good. Every process can benefit from red teaming and the exploration of weaknesses and ways to make it better.
6. Understand that risk presents differently based on the context the person is in and the environmental stressors and experiences they are having. Like a river, continue to assess risk as the water changes.
7. Move from a threat or risk assessment process to a threat or risk management one. Look for ways to mitigate risk over time and ensure the management plan shifts based on the new risk assessments.



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