

## Mental illness, like physical ailments, can be deadly

Early identification key, professor says

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The Tucson, Ariz., shooting incident, which resulted in six deaths and a critical brain injury for U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., has sparked a series of debates across the country.

Some have argued that the nation's gun laws are too lax and it needs further restrictions on assault weapons.

Alleged shooter Jared Loughner, charged with the shooting, reportedly used a Glock 19, semi-automatic pistol, with an extended magazine.

Others claim that the country's political rhetoric has become too heated and has reached the point of inciting violence. Almost immediately after the shootings, blame fell on Sarah Palin and other conservatives for encouraging their followers to "take aim" at their political adversaries.

However, Loughner, 22, hasn't been shown to have a particularly liberal or conservative political ideology.

Both of these arguments miss what is more likely the fundamental issue — mental illness.

According to several sources, Loughner's relatively normal behavior became increasingly erratic after he dropped out of high school. He later attended a community college, but the school asked him to leave after several students and instructors expressed concerns about his behavior.

Friends of Loughner also claim that he began to use psychoactive drugs such as marijuana, LSD and salvia. Substances that Dr. David Rosenberg, professor of psychiatry and behavioral neurosciences at Wayne State, said could have exacerbated his illness.

“There are a number of triggers, but the underlying cause is far deeper,” Rosenberg said.

“Mental illness — when untreated, especially during key developmental milestones — can be deadly to the person and others.

“When substance abuse is put on top of it, (it is) even more so. These are huge risk factors.”

He also believes that it’s unlikely that political rhetoric alone led to the mass shooting in Tucson.

“It is over-simplistic to say that rhetoric from politicians and the media caused this,” Rosenberg said. “The proof is the many others who see the same rhetoric but don’t become suicidal or killers.

“The key is being able to identify those who are most vulnerable earlier and having better treatments.”

But identifying such people is a large part of the problem. According a study by Dr. Michael Fleming in the January edition of “American Journal of Orthopsychiatry,” one out of every four students who visits a university health center is actually dealing with some form of depression, but most of them are never screened.

“Depression screening is easy to do, we know it works, and it can save lives,” Fleming said. “It should be done for every student who walks into a health center.”

At WSU, Counseling and Psychological Services aids students who are dealing with depression and other mental illnesses. CAPS provides short-term one-on-one therapy sessions as well as group therapy.

They can also refer students to outside resources for particularly at-risk cases. Many students, however, aren’t even aware that the university offers such services.

“I had no idea there was anything like CAPS,” said a WSU student who has used CAPS services but asked to not be identified. “There were times when I would walk down the sidewalk and just cry. For no particular reason I would just start crying.

“But then the next day I’d feel fine again so I thought I was just having mood swings. But it was always a constant up and down, and it just kept getting worse and worse.”

The student learned about CAPS after talking to an instructor.

Several people close to Loughner said they thought he was schizophrenic, but as he has never been formally diagnosed, his mental health condition is unknown.

Because people with mental illnesses are often socially withdrawn, many don't receive treatment for their condition until doing harm to themselves or others.

Therapists encourage friends and family members who suspect that someone they know is suffering from a mental disorder to seek help early, as a timely diagnosis can help considerably.

"The earlier the treatment and intervention the better," Rosenberg said. "The longer treatment is delayed, the more the behaviors become hardwired; if help is not provided, the harder [it is] to treat. Really, it's quite simple."

"It's like any illness. If someone gets a minor cut and gets proper treatment it heals. If not, it can get infected, you can get gangrene you might die.

"Similarly, with a medical illness like diabetes, if you intervene early and treat it well, you prevent many of the complications like blindness, heart disease, etc. If you ignore it, and don't get treatment, the consequences are deadly."