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Specializing in EAP and Work/Life issues.

## Coping with Trauma and Violence in the Aftermath of the Northern Illinois University Tragedy.

The tragic events of Thursday, February 14, 2008 remind us all that violence can enter into our lives. Though most of us are removed from this horrific event, we cannot help but to identify with the victims and their grief stricken families, friends and loved ones. We feel the terror that those closest to the event experienced. We imagine how we would feel if we were related to one of the victims. We think of the campus personnel – police officers, emergency medical technicians, residence hall staff, and others – who witnessed the carnage firsthand. We think of the young students, frantically calling cell phones to ascertain the wellbeing of friends, calling home to parents to give and receive reassurances, gathering together for hugs and support – all dealing with a close and personal encounter with a horror that no one should have to endure.

Yet, endure it they will, and endure it we must. As mental health clinicians, we know of the resilience of the human spirit. We know that most of those who go through this experience will manage to do so without it greatly altering the natural and healthy trajectories of their lives. This is not to say that they will not have been changed by it. How could they not be?

Those affected by the Northern Illinois University tragedy – victims, friends, family, first responders, and those in the larger university community – will do what we all do in these times. They will join together in mutual support and solidarity. They will cling closer to friends and family. They will seek to learn and understand why the event took place. They will avoid those places and activities that might bring the awful memories back. They will suffer, at least for a time, through post-trauma reactions – flashbacks, sleep disturbances, racing thoughts etc. They will ultimately find some larger meaning to the event – some way of making sense out of it, and some way for them to move forward in their own lives.

We also know that for a small minority of those affected, this event may precipitate a long-term deterioration in functioning. As the natural and normative reactions to trauma persist, this group of individuals is at an increasing risk to develop more problems – depression, substance abuse, anxiety and avoidant disorders.

Though rare, violence can and does enter into our schools, academic institutions and workplaces. Some portion of those violent events can be prevented. Organizations can develop policies and procedures regarding violence in the workplace. They can train their personnel in violence prevention strategies. They can actively promote a non-violent organizational culture. They can develop emergency planning to deal with incidents of violence.

On both individual and organizational levels, HMS can help. We can come onsite for post-trauma support. We can work with management to fashion an organizational response to a trauma. We can help to develop policy and procedure. We are available to consult with organizations around emergent threats of violence.

Our hearts go out to all those affected by this tragedy.

Sincerely,

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