

Navigating the Storm:

Threat Assessment and Mental Health



NaBITA

the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association

Introduction

NaBITa has written great deal about the differences between threat assessment, violence risk assessment, psychological assessment, and mental health treatment. **Threat assessment** addresses a direct communicated threat that has been made to determine the lethality of the threat and apply interventions to mitigate the risk. **Violence risk assessments** focus on a broader definition of risk and may include ideations and more general concerns over the risk posed by an individual who may not have made a direct threat to anyone. **Psychological assessments** focus on evaluating mental health concerns and on providing a differential diagnosis and treatment recommendations. **Mental health treatment** is often longer term in nature when compared to the one or two meetings more common for threat, risk, and psychological assessments, and focuses more on changing behavior than labeling risk.

Mental health clinical staff may find themselves providing any one of these four services to students based on their clinical experience and what third-party referrers and the Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) request. At NaBITA, we teach these topics as separate and distinct processes, yet the real world is often more convoluted when it comes to the application of these tasks. Clinical staff members providing outpatient treatment may suddenly find themselves asking threat assessment questions when a patient shares a concerning story during therapy. Clinicians performing threat or risk assessments may come face to face with trauma symptoms, hysteria, panic, suicidal thoughts, and clients struggling with reality testing and hearing voices. Life rarely conforms to the tight tautology we seek to establish.

During the 2014 American Counseling Association Conference, I had the opportunity to conduct a simulated threat assessment on a graduate student to better demonstrate the techniques for the clinical staff in attendance. The session was developed around a hypothetical threat made by the student to a professor. The resulting recording ended up being a much more moving and emotional role-play than I expected. Role-play scenarios often develop a life of their own. In this instance, I found myself talking with a graduate student who had been involved in the very real and devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. In the context of the simulated threat assessment, I found myself also trying to address the very real trauma he had experienced along with the poor aftercare he received from clinicians. I considered how to best to develop a plan moving forward that maintained the integrity of the threat assessment process, yet also addressed the pain and trauma that unfolded in front of me.

For two years following the training, I struggled with the best way to share this material with other clinical staff in the field. While the training vignette does well at demonstrating the basic concepts of threat assessment, I felt there was more to this simulation beyond the threat assessment content. There was also an emotional aspect as we explored the trauma the student experienced.



I felt moved as I spoke with the student during our time together. When we began talking about the student's garden and his dogs, Serena and Lucy, I realized that we started moving quickly, almost like sliding down some kind of slick, rocky surface, from threat assessment into something more. As I have experienced with clients in the past, we began to connect on a deeper level, and in a more powerful way. While he spoke of his roses and those he had lost, I moved away from threat assessment and found myself very much sitting next to his pain, grief, and attempts to put his life back together after so many devastating losses.

I offered compassion while simultaneously trying to address both the needs of the person in front of me and the school's concern about the case study's more hypothetical content — a threat from a student to a professor. In the end, I felt there was something more important here beyond the information gathering we teach in threat and violence risk assessments. This scenario represents a heartfelt display from a counselor offering support to someone who has been through a traumatic event. And while the interview was not intended as a demonstration of psychological assessment or treatment, I found myself very naturally offering the student my empathy and support in the face of his traumatic experiences.

This training exercise transcends its original intent as a threat assessment demonstration, becoming something more. What exactly that is still eludes me, though I know something important happened during this time. There is something beautiful in the chaos of our conversation, and an important lesson for those who must conduct threat, violence risk, and psychological assessments on campus about the importance of being able to step beyond the confines of our assessor roles to connect with the students we seek to help on a deeper level.

For this training paper, we have included a transcript of the role-play that can be more carefully examined and explored. We have also included an MP3 of the audio from the session, as so much of the conversation revolves around the tenor and tone of how we talk with each other. My hope is that you find this unique training vignette helpful and that some of the conversation resonates with the work we do on a daily basis with our students across the country.

As always, your comments and feedback are very much appreciated and welcomed at brian@nchem.org.

Audio Transcript

Brian: Peter, my name is Dr. Van Brunt. Nice to meet you and have you here today.

Peter: You too.

Brian: Grab a seat here and make yourself comfortable. What I wanted to talk to you today a little bit about the situation going on with your professor. There was a concern reported to me, and my role with the school is to really have a conversation with you, about the concern, the threat, that was made against your professor. So I want to... I heard the school's side of the story and I want to hear your side of the story and get a better understanding of what happened from you. Can you walk be through what was going on with this professor?

Peter: Well, yeah, I had umm. Let's start with... I had approached her the first day of class and told her that I have special learning needs that school.... for accommodations.

Brian: Sure.

Peter: And it's not typical for her class to have my books on audiotape.

Brian: OK.

Peter: And, she'd prefer it if I didn't use them in class. And, but, she had signed the agreement that she would accommodate me with all the needs that the university said that I could utilize to be able to be successful in her class.

Brian: Yeah.

Peter: And, she only had two exams. One was the midterm and one was the final. And up to the point of the midterm, she refused to let me use, for me to use a dictation to take my midterm. Instead of writing it out, I can vocalize it and have it typed out for me.

Brian: OK.

Peter: And, which I ended up failing her class.

Brian: Ohhh.

Peter: I failed my midterm, I should say. And, when I met with her and asked her about that and explained my side of the story, she said that it wasn't her problem and that it was my fault for not being able to answer her questions and to do her exam, you know, that everybody else was. She's not going to make the exception for me from the rest of the students that were in the class.

Brian: Wow. I mean, there's a lot going on there already, because one of the things I know is that when I was in graduate school we had these classes... the ones where you just have the two tests. I mean, you're in this heightened stress environment already. Right?



Peter: Right.

Brian: Because she's only giving you these two opportunities to get grades in her class, the midterm and the final.

Peter: Correct.

Brian: And there was a book on tape that you needed or that you...

Peter: Well, all my books were on audiotape, OK?

Brian: Audio, OK.

Peter: ...then, which helps follow along. It's kinda like I need to over-stimulate to learn.

Brian: Yep.

Peter: So when it comes to exams, I can use software called Dragon, which is I talk into a microphone, it dictates it instead of me trying to write it out. I can talk it because I can organize my thoughts better when I'm talking out loud.

Brian: Sure.

Peter: And instead of disrupting her whole class, I go into a separate facility and take it, and she didn't like that. And, she... so I couldn't take the exam where I'm disrupting the whole class and talking about it verbally to myself to put my thoughts on paper. And not allowing me to do that, I ended up not being able to write as well, you know?

Brian: It seems like it would make the whole class harder.

Peter: Well, it does. I mean, her expectations says that if it's less than 15 pages, then she wouldn't accept it. It was an automatic fail. So I'm like, I can't write 15 pages in two hours even if I tried, and I can talk that fast, but I can't write my thoughts out, organized, as she wanted them, on paper.

Brian: Yeah.

Peter: And so I ended up failing. And when I got my exam back I, unfortunately, kind of told her out loud that I wished she was dead and she better watch behind her back because she'd be taken care of, and you know, my whole class heard it, so I guess that's why I'm sitting here.

Brian: Yeah. Well, that is why you're sitting here today.

Peter: [Laughs nervously.]

Brian: You know, in this day and age, one of the things colleges are doing is paying more attention to threats that are made, and I appreciate you coming in and talking with me today. Not everyone always takes that opportunity to come in. I've had folks who have been invited and they don't



always come in, so I appreciate you coming in. I can't imagine that this was an easy thing for you. To come in, to come, I mean especially because you're studying counseling, to come in to some counselor's office and talk to me about, you know, a threat that you made to the professor.

Peter: Right. Well, it's embarrassing, because everyone says I'm supposed to be a counselor and like, I'm human, and it felt like my rights were taken away to succeed in this so... you know, my self-defense is to get violent, you know, is a threat.

Brian: Yeah. Is this the only professor that you've had this accommodation request with who's been...

Peter: No.

Brian: So you've had other requests to professors. How about the response? I mean, has she been the first to be like "No, not for my class?"

Peter: Out of the three professors, out of the three classes I was taking, they signed the agreements. One accommodated. The other two were like, "No, this is my classroom and I don't change the policy for anybody. I will sign this," but she crossed out everything that was written down that I could have used as accommodations.

Brian: Yeah, it's already hard enough, and then you're having this other uphill battle trying to argue with your professors to get the extra help that you need to do well.

Peter: Well, just to get a fair shot at being able to succeed in the class.

Brian: So it's not even extra help. It's just getting to that level playing field with everyone else.

Peter: Correct.

Brian: Maybe even my verbalization of extra shot... maybe that's kind of how they view it.

Peter: Well...

Brian: Maybe they see it as, "Why do you get this special treatment?" when you're just trying to get even.

Peter: I don't look at it, at a learning disability, as special treatment. I think everybody learns in a different way and you're in a university where they are there to teach you, so this is the way that I learn. I mean, I had to go through testing through the university and they determined, this is how he's gonna learn and succeed in this program, and to me I thought she's going against the university because she denied what they said I have to use to be able to make it through this course.

Brian: Yeah, that makes sense to me. So you know, you kind of went through all the hoops that they set up for you here [with] the testing, and the meetings, and all this extra stuff, and now you bring the paper to the professor and they...



Peter: They're saying "no."

Brian: Or they are making you jump through other hoops? They give you a provisional "yes," they say "yes," but then they are scratching stuff off.

Peter: Correct.

Brian: Wow. I'm sorry about that.

Peter: I just figured it'll come around in one way.

Brian: How, with the learning disability, with the challenges that you've had getting through college and getting up into graduate school, has this been a frustration that you've had before with folks in a teaching environment, or have they been more accommodating for you?

Peter: Undergraduate is more accommodating. I mean, I've always had a learning disability and I dropped out of high school because it got too frustrating for me. I decided to go back when I was 38. Get my high school diploma, GED, and get into undergrad and grad school.

Brian: Sure.

Peter: Late bloomer, eventually I got it, but... I've always had the frustration in high school, but they didn't determine that I had a learning disability until I was in the 11th grade. And at that point, I was so far behind I said, "Screw it," you know. I kinda had a bad feeling with school. And I thought well, as I got older, I'm more determined to do something. And with that still in my mind from high school, I didn't think I was going to make it, but I made it. You know, and they said this is what you have, and they helped me with my undergrad and transitioned me to the graduate level easier [than] trying to do it on my own.

Brian: So not always an easy journey for you, but one that you worked hard to stick with.

Peter: Yeah.

Brian: It reminds me of the old [saying], "College isn't a sprint, it's a marathon," and kind of sticking with it and fighting.

Peter: There's a lot of fighting there. I mean, it's slow and steady, but you know, somehow I'll figure out a way to get there. But I relied on the school to be helping me get there. And some professors kind of pulled that out from underneath me and I take offenses to it.

Brian: That's understandable. Have you ever had a conduct action like this, where you have to meet with someone or got in trouble at school? Or where you had something that you did like this that the school didn't like, or they required you to meet with student conduct or something?

Peter: Well my conduct as always, let's just say this is the first time I've been caught.

Brian: OK, so you've had some problems before, but you haven't been called in.

Peter: Let's just say that I've made some... I guess you would say threatening emails, you know, to professors, or talked about it with my classmates about our professors. I made sure the professors would kind of overhear me, but couldn't really hear what I was saying, but you would hear something, but this was the actual one where my anger got the best of me and where I verbalized it vocally and slammed the door where everybody heard.

Brian: So this is, if I'm following it right, you've done things before, but never to this level and this was louder and maybe a little more out of control than normal.

Peter: This was more out of control than normal, for me.

Brian: In the world I work, in threat assessment, they talk about this difference between saying things and doing things. And I want to talk to you a little bit about that concept. Just to be straight with you and kind of get it out on the table. That if you were in my shoes, part of what you'd be trying to figure out, is this someone that said something that they regretted and never would really hurt them versus someone where they said something and they've been thinking about hurting them for quite some time, and trying to figure out which category you would fall into there. Is this something you'd actually do? Have you thought about what you'd do in terms of hurting her? Or is this more of an impulsive thing that you just shouted out? Tough question.

Peter: Well, it's kind of a two-part question for me.

Brian: Sure.

Peter: 'Cause for me it's two different lives. Lives where yeah, I would have thought about it and plotted it out and I wouldn't have carried it out. I would have hired somebody to carry it out for me.

Brian: Hmm.

Peter: To where I'm at today, where I would just verbalize it and then regret it, and say "Ah, that was not the right thing to say..." And I have, I could, I don't want to say rationalize it, 'cause I still think about it sometimes and it's like, "What can I do to make their life a living hell?" if I could, you know? Whether it's being up in her face, or it's just being more of a problem student than I need to be.

Brian: Yeah. What motivates you toward that? When I hear that, I immediately think well, "If they've hurt me then I'm going to hurt them back." I mean, is that where you're coming from?

Peter: Yeah. That's where I'm coming from. I mean, I've... I've always had to fight for everything, and those who I feel are a threat to what I take seriously, like my education... before I never really took seriously, it was more like eh, but more just the same to be saying something stupid, but now it's more of a personal threat so I take it, when I feel like it's... I'm losing it, that's when I'll



defend for it. It's sometimes too late when I've said the words. Or the actions that I kinda regret, 'cause it wasn't the right way or whatever.

Brian: Are there things in your life that help you feel more... I guess I'm going to use some words that may not fit, but... but kind of calm and safe and stable in terms of, you know, not saying these kinds of things. You know for me, when I get angry, when I get upset, some of the things that help me from being more explosive or sharing that with someone, are my friends, my family, intimate relationships, the person I'm dating, my kids. What helps you get to that point, or do you have that kind of group around you that helps keep you...?

Peter: I don't have that group. I have my great dane. I have my two great danes that are my kind of release, or my gardening. I lost everybody I knew during Katrina, so I don't really have anybody left, you know. So I carry a lot of that guilt with me sometimes.

Brian: Were you in New Orleans when Katrina hit?

Peter: Yes.

Brian: Wow.

Peter: And so my anger, because I don't have anybody to talk to, and the friends that I have at school, they're so much younger than me that they can't relate to what I've been through, so I usually just keep it to myself. And so I... my safe haven, when I get that angry, is to resort to my dog. She's the only one that was with me; she got out with me. She's been with me ever since so, she's like the only one that knows when I'm at that point that can calm me down.

Brian: Yeah. What's your dog's name?

Peter: Serena.

Brian: Serena. Cool. And you said you had two?

Peter: I have two. I have Lucy, her daughter. I bred her. She had a puppy, and so her name is Lucy.

Brian: I have a beagle mix, so not the big great danes. Are they big dogs?

Peter: Oh, yeah, 150 lbs.

Brian: Whoa.

Peter: They're four feet tall.

Brian: They're your touch point.

Peter: They're my grounding point. And I'll... they don't have to be with me, but I think of them, like OK, who's going to take care of them? That will calm me down because Serena has kinda special

needs that nobody can take care of like I can. So that kinda keeps me in check 'cause there's nobody there for her except for me, and so that's my calming. That's where my brain goes when I get so mad that I can't see straight that I have to think of... She's the first thing that pops into my head, is, "What's gonna happen to her?"

Brian: Yeah, she's kind of a safety place for you. You said a touching point.

Peter: She's my touching point.

Brian: I like that phrase. Yeah. Thanks. Thanks for sharing that with me. You said gardening too. Is a passion of yours? Do you grow flowers, or food, or a little bit of both?

Peter: No, I have what I call my victory garden. It's a rose garden that I've created of everybody that I've lost and I've planted a rose for everybody that I've lost, and I nurture it as if they were alive. Just keeping the weeds out, and cutting the blooms, and feeding and, you know... I can spend days there.

Brian: Wow. It's a beautiful image. I haven't heard of someone who had a way of...

Peter: I talk to them every day. I don't have anyone I can talk to, so that's who I talk to, is my roses.

Brian: I'm having these two thoughts at once, simultaneously. One is, like I said, it's such a beautiful image of how to express grief and how to express things and have a way to kind of connect. And on the other hand, I have this image of if it's a garden, how many roses do you have?

Peter: Two-hundred and forty.

Brian: Wow. [Sounds astonished.]

Peter: It's 150-feet-long garden.

Brian: The enormity of that just blows me away. Is that from Katrina?

Peter: Katrina.

Brian: Wow.

Peter: Well, Katrina and like my sister died 15 years ago, and my father died eight years ago, and just my grandparents and you know, people who have just died, but mostly it was my friends and my partner that I had in New Orleans. My people that worked for me, and you know, anybody that was any part of my life there, I've lost. And so, I... you know, when I started it, it didn't seem to be that big of a deal until I finished and it wraps around a corner. My house sits on a corner, and from my driveway all the way around to the alley is my rose garden. You know, now people stop and they ask if they can cut them, and I'm like "no, because you're cutting them, you know, from me."



Brian: Wow. Well thank you for sharing that. It's a beautiful image and one that speaks to your loss and your journey. It's powerful.

Peter: Well, it's a journey that got me into counseling. You know, that's what made me decide to become a counselor. Going through Katrina, the only part of reality of my world was helping people. And to get some kind of normalcy, and I found it comforting to take care of other people that were stuck on the streets. So when I got out of there and I went through a series of problems, but when I finally came to and when realized that's what I'm supposed to be doing. So I got into a program, and so having this professor telling me that I wasn't good enough for the counseling program, she invaded me and told me that I couldn't do that, and that's not what I wanted to hear her say. So...

Brian: What did you do before? When you were in Katrina, in New Orleans?

Peter: I have an old art, lost art function. I can use hot plaster molding. And in the French Quarter they, all the molding and the medallions, they are made out of hot plaster. And that was my job, I owned a business that... I would go and restore, restorate old medallions and hot mud plastering.

Brian: Hmmm. I feel like there's some kind of connection between that and counseling too. You're kinds of going in and fixing.

Peter: Fixing.

Brian: Recasting. Replastering.

Peter: Recasting. Replastering, molding. and reshaping, helping them find or look better to the original state of who that person is supposed to be.

Brian: Hm. Well, I see, I think a little more, and much as I can, why this incident with this professor was particularly one that struck you as hard as it did and kind of created that reaction in you, that frustration.

Peter: Mm-hm.

Brian: You know, one of the things you said concerns me. This idea that in the past you might have hired someone to deal with this, and that seems so out of step from the conversation we're having. Was that an actually statement, in the past you would have found... I'm thinking of a hit man. I don't know... that's...

Peter: Well, you can say hit man, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying in the past that's something that I would have done. Would I have it carried out? It was a threat. So I don't know.

Brian: OK.



Peter: People never really pushed me to that point, but they pushed it, pushed me far enough to where I'd say that statement. I have that ability? Yes.

Brian: To find someone that could hurt the person...

Peter: Well, yeah.

Brian: OK.

Peter: You know, where I've come from and how I was brought up, I've learned that there's you know, you can put a price for everything.

Brian: OK.

Peter: You know, but nobody's really actually gotten me to that point. I've made the threat and that was enough for where they would back off. And have I ever actually carried it out? No.

Brian: Do you think it's gotten to that point with this professor that you've been thinking more about that, fantasizing more about what that would be like?

Peter: This one professor I can't seem to let it go. I'm holding on to it. You know. Would I carry it out? I'm hoping I won't, but I find myself thinking about it, you know, how to go about doing it. And I find kind of a satisfaction with it. You know, that it kind of helps me find a peace. You know, and I'm kind of like, "Hmm, I can do this and not feel bad about it?"

Brian: Almost like a sol...

Peter: Because she deserves it. She's done this to me. She's done this to other students. She deserves to be taken out. You know, she's not a very good professor.

Brian: So there are two things that I'm hearing. One, that there's almost like a solace that would come from that, like a peace, and also this sense of justice. That she deserves this; that this is something that... if she didn't act this way, this isn't something that would have happened.

Peter: Correct.

Brian: She's....

Peter: She provoked it, so she has it coming to her.

Brian: OK. She made her own bed...

Peter: She's gonna lie in it.

Brian: With all the things that you've been through, I can't connect to that. New Orleans is a beautiful city, and one that I've visited often, but I didn't go through anything like what you've gone through, losing that much. [Pause.] Help me understand, you mentioned the rose garden. You



mentioned the dogs, you know, Serena and Lucy, that help you through this. Counseling, is that something that you've considered? Have you talked to a counselor before? A psychologist about some of this, or that just doesn't fit for you?

Peter: I have. And they actually don't want to go into that area with me because they don't... Well, they tell me that they are not qualified to handle that kind of traumatic experience.

Brian: I'm sorry about that. That's unfortunate.

Peter: It's not for my lack of not trying; it's a lack of there's no service to help me.

Brian: Wow.

Peter: So, which it makes me feel like I'm just going to be living in this area of my mind without really resolving it. Kinda of why I'm going into counseling. Maybe I can help counsel myself, you know, and help find the answers, you know, within my own being that... It's kind of hard to look at yourself and say, "Well OK, I don't have anyone pushing my own buttons but me, and it doesn't really work 'cause I kinda go around it."

Brian: Yeah. I've always thought it was kind of a noble pursuit. I've known a lot of people who have gone through counseling programs, and I've actually trained some graduate students myself, and people going through that process, to me, there's a nobility to try and understand yourself a bit more, you know, through that process, you know, kind of healing yourself. But like you said, I think there is some limitation to it. It's hard to be your own doctor sometimes.

Peter: I can't be my own doctor. Now like, I can help somebody going through a crisis, you know. I could help you per say. I could understand what you're going through. And that's basically why I wanted to get into this. Where I live, there's nobody. You know, to have the three therapists that I went to, and say that they can't help me because they don't understand what I'm going through, and the thoughts that I have and what triggers them, that I'd be the first in my area to have that ability to help people in a crisis situation.

Brian: I'm really sorry for that. You know, I feel like in our conversation even today, that I've hinted at that myself saying I don't have a frame of reference for going through the pain that you went through. As a clinician though, I don't see that as precluding me from talking to you about it. And that part is... I feel sorry that you've gone through that with other therapists. It feels like you showed up with a gallon of water to try to share and they had this cup and they're like, "Oh, you have a gallon of water. Yeah, I can't. I only have a cup."

Peter: Mm-hm.

Brian: And that leaves you feeling like, like me, if I were in that situation, feeling pretty horrible.

Peter: Well, it makes me feel worse about myself.



Brian: Here's the professional and they can't help me either.

Peter: Right. I've sought it. I've been denied that. So therefore I'm left with what?

Brian: Right. Well. I know you came in to see me today in the threat assessment capacity, and to maybe take a moment to explain a little bit more of what I'm looking at. You know, we're talking, and after this conversation I'm going to talk to the dean of students and make a recommendation about whether you stay in the program or not. One of the recommendations, I can tell you right off, is I feel like we have a nice connection; I would like to continue seeing you, and I do feel comfortable talking about some of the things you're going through. You know, for you to stay at this school, to have an opportunity to talk to someone. You know, you don't have to make a decision right now about that, but I do feel like part of this process is going to be connecting you up with someone that can talk to you about some of the things that you're having going on in your head.

Peter: OK.

Brian: So, I don't need an answer right this minute, but that, as I'm talking to you and listening to your story, I feel like having you have some ongoing connection with someone from our counseling center, and whether that's me or one of the other clinicians here, would be helpful for you, I think. I know you've relocated to Texas from New Orleans. Perhaps not your choice, I don't know.

Peter: It's not my choice.

Brian: No. I know a lot of folks that moved up. Are you planning to go back at some point, or are you...? That's a big question.

Peter: I've attempted to. Nine attempts to get to New Orleans, and I end up driving around the state. And I can't get myself to cross the border. So that's... that's...

Brian: It's really fresh for you.

Peter: ...that's something I'm still trying to work through.

Brian: OK.

Peter: Would I ever go back there? I don't think I can.

Brian: OK.

Peter: I mean, my images of it are too... are too ingrained to think beyond, you know, going back there. I have to stay in the present, and I can't take the present there because when I hit that border I go back to August 28th. And it's just drilled into my head, and I can't change it. And that's the date I go back to, and even though it was just last year I tried to go, and that date came back into my head and that was it. I turned around and drove all the way around and went to Florida instead.



Brian: Tried your best to make it there.

Peter: I tried my best to make it there in three days. I took a week because I had to drive around Louisiana.

Brian: There's a strength to that, I feel...

Peter: I think it's crazy.

Brian: ...the trying. Well, sometimes there's a strength in craziness to, you know, to try nine different times, to try and get back to what I assume you would see as home, but feeling like you hit that wall, but you try again.

Peter: Right.

Brian: These are all things I'd love to keep talking to you about. For the assessment that I'm doing today, I have a couple other questions I was going to ask, if you feel comfortable answering.

Peter: Sure.

Brian: They're kind of, sometimes they can feel a bit like non-sequiturs. They're just kind of... they're part of a list I have in my head.

Peter: OK.

Brian: I know Texas is a bit of a gun state...

Peter: It is.

Brian: ...and one of the questions I have is around firearms, your both, knowledge with them and whether you own them. Can tell me a little about that?

Peter: I own 'em. I have a permit to carry a concealed weapon. I keep one in my glove box.

Brian: Yeah. What kind of gun do you have?

Peter: I have a 35-millimeter.

Brian: OK.

Peter: And I go to the pistol range every weekend, um, and shoot. I like to target practice. Um, it's... What else do you want to know? I don't hunt animals or deer. I did that with my father with a shotgun, but I carry a 35.

Brian: Is it a pistol or a revolver?

Peter: It's a revolver.



Brian: Yeah, nice. When you target shoot, do you use those big qualifying targets, or do you go with the little ones with the little highlighting kind of things you can put on them? What kind of target shooting...?

Peter: No, I go with the big piece of paper, but then that kinda gets boring, so I kinda make my own targets.

Brian: Yeah [with interest]. Yeah. What do you do?

Peter: Glass bottles, just because it makes a big explosion. And kind, you can see what you've done.

Brian: With the colored water and stuff.

Peter: Colored water.

Brian: Cool.

Peter: Yeah.

Brian: You just do that out in the back yard?

Peter: No, I go to the pistol range.

Brian: OK.

Peter: My back yard, I'm in a residential area so...

Brian: ...that would be frowned upon. A residential area...

Peter: Well, I can be arrested for shooting it in my neighborhood.

Brian: Yeah that's...

Peter: ...but I do do that at the pistol range.

Brian: So it's like an outdoor pistol range then, or...?

Peter: It's an outdoors.

Brian: OK. I've only gone a couple times to pistol ranges, and they've always been indoors, so I just haven't seen the outdoors ones before.

Peter: No, Texas has outdoors.

Brian: Have you ever thought about using the gun, you know, in this situation with the professor?

Peter: Um...

Brian: I know that you had mentioned that you would lean towards someone else doing that for you. I don't know if that's something that...



Peter: Um...

Brian: ...Go ahead...

Peter: ...I use mine for protection in my home. And like, where I go to school, I carry it. Um, just it gives me a safety. Have I thought about using it on somebody, as a human? Ah... no. That thought... I never thought of it that way.

Brian: OK.

Peter: If I had to? Yes, I could. Um, I have used it before. You know, in self-defense during Katrina, but... I remember that feeling and the smell... and I don't think I could do it out of anger. Now, for self-protection, yes I could.

Brian: Wow. So a lot of that trauma is just so right there at the top for you.

Peter: Yeah. And, but, I mean, to actually shoot somebody? And to smell it. And to witness... Ah, I don't know how to describe it... the sensation that you get, it is... It stays with you.

Brian: Yeah...

Peter: And to know that I did it out of a self-defense 'cause where I was living, during Katrina, it was martial law. And I have been tried on this and was released for self-defense. But it was that smell of the, the burning of the flesh going... it stays with me. And even as angry as I can get, I don't think I could cause a person, out of my anger, who made me mad, shooting them. I can see it if they were threatening, coming into my home, or threatening my life or my dogs or... my home. Yes, I could do it.

Brian: Sounds like you were pretty close to the person if your were able to smell the flesh as well with the...

Peter: Well, yeah. It was in New Orleans. I had broken into house and I claimed it as my own 'cause I had lost mine. And I was protecting two older women who had been hurt from the hurricane. And, um, when [pausing, tearful, and choked up]... this is the hard part...

Brian: Let's, let's hold on to that then...

Peter: Um, it's just... when the storm hit... the prison lost power, and so every person that was in the jail system was out. The rapists, the murderers, the kidnappers, were all rein free. And you basically didn't care at that point. You didn't know who you were with. And they were in my doorway coming into my building and I shot 'em. And they were no further than you and I sitting here.

Brian: Wow, it strikes me Peter, again, the strength that you have, managing this kind of stuff on your own, and I'm also frustrated that the therapists that you've tried to talk to before that have turned you away because clearly, you know, you are expressing things that could benefit from

being talked about. And I'm hoping, once again, that you'd feel comfortable coming back in, and even later this week, to talk with me about some of these things, because they are powerful, powerful things that have hit you, and I think getting some of those things out, and being able to talk about them will be able to help you gain some peace, which, I think, is something I'd like you to have. I mentioned some of the other questions I have kinds of floating down... This one feels like it would relate as well a sense of sadness or depression or maybe even to the point of suicide or thinking of killing yourself. Has that been something that's come across your mind too?

Peter: They've been there. They're there. And, um, sadness a lot. Depression, I guess it goes with sadness. Suicide, I think it has just... it has always been part, since this whole experience with New Orleans. It's always been there, just because I've my own guilt of why not me. But then I just think of what they... I take the bad that I've been through and there has to be something good that can come out of me. And that's the only thing that I can tell myself, is that I don't have to define myself as that person.

Brian: Yeah.

Peter: You know, I can be somebody better... if... I can just change the way I think. That's...

Brian: Back to the counseling, right? You know, trying to make yourself better...

Peter: ...Well, I don't know at this point... It's like counseling or not, I need to figure out a way to change my thinking on... and try to find a better solution than... killing myself... killing somebody else. You know, hurting, causing harm, there has to be something...

Brian: Finding some larger way to give back, some larger meaning or purpose.

Peter: I have to give back somehow. I don't know how, so... trying to find that [choking up]...

Brian: Well, I would like to help you with some of that. I really would. Couple other questions for today. The issue of substance abuse is hard to ignore, you know, coming out of that situation, coming out of that kind of trauma. Is that something that you struggled with before? Is that something on your...?

Peter: Did I struggle or was I an addict? [Laughs nervously.]

Brian: I'll leave that to you...

Peter: Well, um...

Brian: I guess that's a yes.

Peter: I never... yeah, it's a yes... I self-medicated. I never drank or did drugs until Katrina. I became... I shot up crystal meth and heroin to get through those times.

Brian: OK. Are you clean now? Have you been clean...?



Peter: Yeah. I've been clean seven years. Which helps with a lot of the irrational thoughts that I had prior to my recovery.

Brian: OK. In terms of going back to class, what I'd like to see right now is just kind of a mediation between you and the professor to get you back into class. I know you've had some anger towards her and some frustrations around the accommodation stuff. I can say pretty clearly, she does have some responsibility to accommodate for you, and I think we could talk with her about that to make sure that you're getting the accommodations that are legally afforded to you in that class.

Peter: OK.

Brian: I'd like the dean of students to be a little more active in the conversation with that professor to make sure that you have an advocate there. And that's the kind of stuff that I think we can do for you. The stuff I'm going to need from you is tough, because I'd like to get you back into that class. I'd like to get you moving, if you'd like to, towards your degree, get you finished where you need to be. But that requires you to work with me on some of this anger and some of these issues that are going on for you. Does that sound like something that you think you'd be willing to do?

Peter: Yes. I would.

Brian: OK, I know the trauma stuff is going to be prevalent, and that's probably a place that we'll start. Helping you talk about some of those stories and having you share some of those stories with me, if you're comfortable. I think that's hard to avoid, you know, and an issue that I think it would be good for you to talk about. So I would suggest maybe tomorrow, if you have some free time? I'm not sure what your schedule is like, but having you come back and let's pick that up right away, and talk a bit more?

Peter: OK.

Brian: I would also love to see a few pictures of your dogs...

Peter: [Laughs.]

Brian: ...I would love to see Lucy and Serena and...

Peter: No problem.

Brian: Sure. Any questions for me? Or any concerns that you have?

Peter: When do you think I'll be able to get back into class?

Brian: I'd say from here, what I'll do is I'll talk to the dean of students right after our meeting. I'm going to give her a call. I'm going to make some suggestions about her talking with the professor and the professor's dean, the department head, around the accommodations issue and looking at that more closely. Because if you do have, as you've said, and I believe you, these accommodations



for the audio books and she was not able to work with you around those, we have to have a conversation with the professor about that.

In terms of the threats, in terms of what you said, I do think we have to have a conversation with you and the professor, probably with me present, maybe with the dean present, around getting past that. And whether that means an apology, whether that means, “Mea culpa, I won’t do this again,” that I think has to be a starting place for the professor feeling comfortable having you back in class.

Peter: OK.

Brian: If she’s not comfortable having you back in class, then we can look at some other options. We can look at an incomplete. We can look at having another professor take over and actually finish the course requirements that you might have, depending on the class. Or we could look at switching you to another section. But I do think having someone in your corner to help you with these things would be useful. So that’s kind of where we would head from here. Does that sound alright?

Peter: Sounds alright to me.

Brian: Alright. Well, Thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

Questions & Answers

Q. Just how much of a threat does Peter pose to the instructor?

A. On one hand, Peter does own a handgun, knows how to use it, and has in fact shot a person before. Plus, he stated that he is capable of hiring someone to hurt or possibly kill a person for him. Coupled with his admittance of past alcohol and drug abuse, lack of personal support network, and his delicate mental state, there is definitely cause for concern. Additionally, Peter says at one point about the professor that he “can’t seem to let it go,” and that fantasizing about hurting the professor brings him a sense of peace. This is alarming. However, a thorough threat assessment cannot stop there.

The vast losses Peter suffered from Hurricane Katrina, and his subsequent inability to find a therapist willing to help him work through that means that perhaps, some grief counseling could likely help him get to a more balanced state of mental health, where his temper could be better controlled. Second, Peter still experiences a very visceral reaction to the memory of shooting someone, and it’s clearly not something he wants to relive. Finally, we learn that he has made similar veiled threats before, but just never ended up in the conduct process for them. Having never carried out those threats, it seems likely that he just makes them in the heat of the moment out of anger, without any true intent or active planning going on.

Given all of these factors, Peter would likely fall into the high Mild/Low Moderate threat level of the NaBITA Threat Assessment Tool. This tells us that he’s likely pretty far from taking any action to realize his threats, but intervention is necessary to prevent an escalation.

Q. How can we balance a need to help Peter, who is clearly dealing with a lot, with the need to keep the instructor and the greater campus community safe?

A. While we may feel badly for everything that Peter has gone through and want to help someone who may seem, more than anything, to just be “lost,” safety must be the paramount concern. Once a determination has been made regarding the risk posed, actions must be taken to mitigate that risk. In this instance, Brian determined that a good way to do so would be by: 1) addressing the source of Peter’s frustration (the lack of disability accommodations that led to a failing midterm grade); and 2) having a mediated conversation with Peter and the professor, and possibly a dean.

If Peter is truly approved for the accommodation, and the professor denied it to him, Peter is entitled to some sort of reparation, such as an accommodated re-take of the midterm. Righting this wrong should remove Peter’s desire for violent justice seeking. The mediated conversation would be a good way to allow Peter to apologize for his behavior and for the professor and/or dean to make behavioral expectations clear to avoid a recurrence going forward.

However, if Peter is unwilling to apologize and promise not to make future threats, or if the professor still does not feel safe from harm, other options must be considered. Brian covered some of these, which could include moving Peter to another section of the course or having another professor finish the course.

Q. Is mandated counseling a good idea in this case?

A. If Peter was unwilling to seek out counseling on his own, this might be an option worth considering. However, Peter does want to achieve sound mental health, and has sought out counseling thrice, unsuccessfully. He seems to understand that he cannot work through his mental health issues alone, and he seems to want to work through those issues.

Brian's approach of first stating his desire to help Peter work through some of those anger issues and asking Peter to come in for more counseling, either with himself or another member of the counseling team, likely made Peter feel that he had a choice in the matter. At the same time, Brian conveys the sense that he wants to help Peter get moving toward degree completion, but in order to be able to help, Peter must also be willing to work with him on those anger issues. So on one hand, Brian uses this very soft, caring approach, and on the other hand, there's this bottom-line statement of what Peter needs to do. That's very much in line with Brian's overall approach of recognizing that Peter's been through a lot and wanting to help him, while at the same time recognizing that the threat made is a serious matter that must be appropriately dealt with.

Q. Are there any confidentiality issues that can arise when a campus counselor is in charge of conducting a threat assessment?

A. Counselors are seen as professionals who, like doctors or lawyers, can offer their clients true confidentiality. So a student who believes he is speaking with a counselor in a counseling role may feel betrayed if he later learns that the content of their conversation was shared with others on the campus BIT. That doesn't mean that a campus counselor can't be the BIT member tasked with conducting a threat assessment conversation. What it does mean is that that individual must be very clear about his role at the onset of such a conversation. Brian did that well. In fact, the first thing he did was explain his role to Peter, so that Peter understood that Brian was there to assess and address the threat from the institution's perspective first and foremost.

Q. Given the need to build rapport with students who may pose a threat, should threat assessment always be the job of a counselor who serves on the BIT?

A. Campus professionals with a counseling background may be in a better position than others to build rapport with students who may pose a threat because they are trained to display empathy and genuine interest. However, individuals in student affairs roles often have the same affect, simply because they care about students. The key is to have someone from the Behavioral



Intervention Team who is empathetic and caring conduct such conversations, regardless of their training and/or official role.

That individual must further be able to balance the desire to help students in distress succeed with the need to conduct thorough and sound threat assessments. Brian accomplished this by putting the student first. In other words, he asked about the student's background and trauma, and only later, after he had established himself as a caring and concerned individual, did he circle back to the tougher questions about weapons, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation.

Key Takeaways

- Balance the need to conduct thorough and sound threat assessments with the need to help students who may be feeling impacted by situational stressors and/or psychiatric conditions.
- Realize that getting students of concern to answer questions designed to assess risk level with honesty first requires developing a good rapport with them.
- Show genuine interest in and concern for students by asking them what's going on in their lives that has led them to behave in an odd or troubling manner. Showing empathy for where students are coming from can go a long way towards helping them see you as an ally rather than a potential enemy.
- Summarize, restate, and reframe what students tell you to make sure you understand what they're trying to convey, demonstrate that you are listening to what they have to say, and help students see if and how any contradicting statements fail to make sense.
- Circle back to questions designed to assess threats that students may be tempted to lie about only once a good rapport has been established. Students may still be hesitant to answer honestly, but they're more likely to express hesitation rather than lie outright.
- Consider whether students own, have access to, or know how to use firearms, are depressed and/or suicidal, have a history of alcohol and drug abuse, are dealing with mental health conditions, or have carried out violent acts in the past as part of your threat assessment.
- Search for context to potential red flags you may notice. For instance, if a student tells you that he has a collection of firearms, don't just assume he's stockpiling to carry out a mass attack. He may be a hunter or have inherited a collection from a deceased family member. If a student says he's harmed someone before, ask about those circumstances rather than jumping to conclusions.
- Let students know that you want to help them, while at the same time telling them what they must do to secure your help, whether that's coming in for future counseling sessions, promising not to engage in the troubling conduct again, or meeting with other campus officials and/or faculty to issue an apology.