The knock on the door came just after 1 in the morning, as my wife and I were getting ready for bed. In the small, Central New York town where we spend summers, “ordinary” people do not knock at that hour, save for the rare tourist with a broken down car and a dead cell phone. Shuffling barefoot into our kitchen, I approached the front door with trepidation and asked, “Who is it?” A young woman’s panicky voice, muffled through the glass, replied, “I’m looking for my brother’s house! Do you know where he lives?” I pulled back the curtain with the door still locked, and saw a sweaty, disheveled figure, standing next to what looked like a child’s scooter. The young woman was stuffed into a short skirt, 2 sizes too small for her zaftig physique. “My car broke down!” she said, her eyes dark with tear-smudged mascara, “I had to ride here on my scooter! Please, can I use your phone?”

I realize now that the bizarre scene at that hour should have prompted more caution on my part. Wisdom would have dictated keeping a safe distance from this late-night intruder. But my gut told me here was a young woman in distress, and my religious beliefs—whispering from somewhere deep in my subconscious—must also have been working within me. After all, doesn’t the Bible (Genesis 18) tell us that Abraham and Sarah welcomed 3 strangers into their tent, bringing them food and kindness? For all they knew, the strangers were thieves or murderers!

In the Jewish faith, hospitality toward strangers is a mitzvah—a commandment. On the other hand, my 30 years of psychiatric training should have had a stronger voice in the matter. Individuals with psychiatric illnesses are not, for the most part, given to violence. In fact, they are more often the target of violent attacks—especially persons with serious mental illness who are also homeless. Yet untreated psychosis, especially when accompanied by substance abuse, is associated with an increased risk of violence. No doubt, I should have been

Violence in the Media: What Effects on Behavior?

by Arline Kaplan

Speculation as to the causes of the recent mass shooting at a Batman movie screening in Colorado has reignited debates in the psychiatric community about media violence and its effects on human behavior. “Violence in the media has been increasing and reaching proportions that are dangerous,” said Emanual Tanay, MD, a retired Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Wayne State University and a forensic psychiatrist for more than 50 years. “You turn on the television, and violence is there. You go to a movie, and violence is there,” Tanay told Psychiatric Times. “Reality is distorted. If you live in a fictional world, then the fictional world becomes your reality.”

The average American watches nearly 5 hours of video each day, 98% of which is watched on a traditional television set, according to Nielsen Company. Nearly two-thirds of TV programs contain some physical violence. Most self-involving video games contain some violent content, even those for children.

Tanay noted, “Anything that promotes something can be called propa-
more wary of someone who had just ridden a child’s scooter to my house, at 1 in the morning.

Sighing deeply, I said, “Okay, you can use my phone.” I opened the door and let the young woman into my house.

At first, things went reasonably well. She gave me a number to call—presumably, her brother’s—but there was no answer. The young woman was sweating profusely and became increasingly more agitated. I thought I smelled alcohol on her breath, but her state of mind suggested a more complex set of problems. “I was just in the hospital,” she blurted, “and my heart stopped! They had to revive me twice. I’m bleeding internally! I have ovarian cysts. I know I’m supposed to take my medication but I don’t like the side effects—and besides, I like my natural highs! Can I have some water or some juice? My blood sugar is low….” And on and on her narrative went, in what emergency department physicians and psychiatrists usually describe as “talking rubber”. If you are not actually in a florid manic state, it’s almost impossible to mimic the “flights of ideas” that this phase of bipolar disorder provokes—a kind of staccato, rat-a-tat-tat of loosely connected thoughts, often delivered in a loud, insistent manner. Okay, I thought, I have just let a floridly manic patient into my house. My wife—a retired psychiatric social worker—had wisely scurried upstairs, to the relative safety of our bedroom.

Over the course of the next 20 minutes or so, I did my best to calm down our young visitor, but there really was no way to calm down a manic patient. This is not an alcoholic to get aversive conditioning to and let the young woman into my house.

Dr Pies is Editor in Chief Emeritus of Psychiatric Times, and a Professor in the psychiatry departments of SUNY Upstate Medical University and Tufts University School of Medicine. He is the author of The Judaic Foundations of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy; a collection of short stories, Zapr’s Ghost; and, most recently, a poetry chapbook, The Heart Broken Open (http://www.harvard.com/book/the_heart_broken_open).
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effects and concluded that the “evidence strongly suggests that exposure to violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior.”

In a Psychiatric Times interview, psychologist Craig Anderson, PhD, Director of the Center for the Study of Violence at Iowa State University, said the evidence for the media violence–aggression link is very strong from every major type of study design: randomized experiments, cross-sectional correlation studies, and longitudinal studies.

In 2007, Anderson’s group reported on a longitudinal study of violent video games. The study queried children and their peers as well as teachers on aggressive behaviors and violent media consumption twice during a school year. The researchers found that boys and girls who played a lot of violent video games changed over the school year, becoming more aggressive.4

“There now are numerous longitudinal studies by several different research groups around the world, and they all find significant violent video game exposure effects,” Anderson said.

In contrast, a longitudinal study published this year by Ferguson and colleagues,1 which followed 165 boys and girls (aged 10 to 14 years) over 3 years, found no long-term link between violent video games and youth aggression or dating violence. Studies from Japan, Singapore, Germany, Portugal, and the US show that “the association between media violence and aggression is similar across cultures,” according to Anderson.

“Most recently,” he added, “we found that within a high-risk population [incarcerated juvenile offenders], violent video games are associated with violent antisocial behavior, even after controlling for the robust influences of multiple correlates of juvenile delinquency and youth violence, most notably psychopathy.”5

There is growing evidence, (Please see Violence, page 11)

Poetry of the Times

by Richard M. Berlin, MD

Sharp-Shinned Hawk

All morning we hike the upland meadows, through devil’s paintbrush, poison sumac, and the heady smell of wild apples rotting in the pale fall sun. Palm warblers twitch their yellow rumps like strung out coke-heads, and cedar waxwings sing drinking songs as they eat fermented berries from the high branches. Two yellow feathers and a skull drop from the sky and fall on the brown scar of trail, a sharp-shinned hawk on a dead branch watching us walk, his brown speckled belly and slate gray wings reflecting the sun.

He considers us, and without a flap opens his wings to the wind and is gone.

Dr Berlin is Senior Affiliate in Psychiatry at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. E-mail: Richard.Berlin@gmail.com. Dr Berlin’s second collection of poems, Secret Wounds, which won the 2010 John Ciardi Poetry Prize—and which was selected by USA Book News as the best poetry book of 2011—is published by BkMk Press.

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Violence

Anderson said, that high exposure to fast-paced violent games can lead to changes in brain function when processing violent images, including dampening of emotional responses to violence and decreases in certain types of executive control. But there also is some evidence that the same type of fast-paced violent games can improve some types of spatial-visual skills, basically, ability to extract visual information from a computer screen.

One of many factors

Despite the links between media violence and aggression, Anderson stressed, “media violence is only one of many risk factors for later aggressive and violent behavior. Furthermore, extremely violent behavior never occurs when there is only one risk factor present. Thus, a healthy, well-adjusted person with few risk factors is not going to become a school-shooter just because they start playing a lot of violent video games or watching a lot of violent movies.”

One of Anderson’s colleagues at Iowa State University, Douglas Gentile, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychology, along with Brad Bushman, PhD, Professor of Communication and Psychology at Ohio State University and Professor of Communication Science at the VU University in Amsterdam, recently published a study that identifies media exposure as one of the 6 risk factors for predicting later aggression in 430 children (aged 7 to 11, grades 3 to 5) from Minnesota schools. “Besides media violence, the remaining risk factors are being toward hostility, low parental involvement, participant sex, physical victimization, and prior physical fights.

Knowing students’ risk for aggression can help school officials determine which students might be more likely to get in fights or possibly bully other students, according to Gentile, who runs the Media Research Lab at Iowa State University. He said he can get “over 80% accuracy” in predicting which child is at high risk for bullying behavior by knowing 3 things—are they a boy, have they gotten in a fight within the past year, and do they consume a lot of media violence.”

In discussing their study findings, Gentile and Bushman wrote: “The best single predictor of future aggression in the sample of elementary schoolchildren was past aggression, followed by violent media exposure, followed by having been a victim of aggression.” They added that their risk-factor approach can “cool down” the heated debate on the effects of media violence, since “exposure to violent media is not the only risk factor for aggression or even the most important risk factor, but it is one important risk factor.”

“We are interested in using this new approach to measuring the multiple risk factors for aggression in additional samples, and also increasing the number of risk factors we examine (there are over 100 known risk factors for aggression).” Gentile told Psychiatric Times. He and colleagues have several studies under way in several countries.

“I am particularly hopeful that this approach will help the public and professionals realize that media violence is not different from other risk factors for aggression. It’s not the largest, nor the smallest,” he said. “If there is any important difference at all, it is simply that media violence is easier for parents to control than other risk factors, such as being bullied, having psychiatric illnesses, or living in poverty.”

References
