



Before tragedy struck at NIU, signs were there

By Marilyn Elias, USA TODAY

Steven Kazmierczak, who killed five students and himself at Northern Illinois University on Thursday, gave some strong clues in his final weeks that he could become violent, and learning to heed such clues might help prevent similar tragedies, mental health experts say.

Kazmierczak, 27, called his girlfriend, Jessica Baty, the night before the shootings to say goodbye and asked her "not to forget about him," she told CNN.

A graduate student at the University of Illinois, Kazmierczak was an anxious person with obsessive-compulsive tendencies who had been prescribed Prozac but stopped taking it three weeks before the shootings because the pills "made him feel like a zombie," Baty said.

Stopping antidepressants abruptly can be dangerous, says John Greden, executive director of the Depression Center at the University of Michigan. Prozac, designed to increase serotonin, a "feel-good" brain chemical, lingers in the body longer than similar medicines, he says.

But serotonin can plummet if the pills are stopped, and the brain chemical often reaches a low point about three weeks after discontinuing, Greden says — just the time of the killing rampage, according to Baty's timetable.

Although people sometimes say they feel like zombies on antidepressants, that tends to go away within a month and, if not, other medications can be tried, Greden says. "But to be safe, patients have to be tapered off antidepressants gradually."

Kazmierczak's mental health problems started before college. His parents had put him in a group treatment center after high school because he cut himself and had become unruly, the Associated Press has reported.

Such cutting behavior often is caused by depression or anxiety, says San Diego-based psychologist Lisa Boesky, an expert on self-injury.

"They can be clean-cut, churchgoing, honors students. They can be homeless, runaway shoplifters and everything in between. ... They're usually experiencing high levels of stress in their lives."

Cutting leads to the release of pain-killing brain chemicals, Greden says. "Kids who do this often describe a profound lifting of tension. All the stress and anxiety goes away, and once you do this, it's hard to stop." If the problems causing Kazmierczak's self-cutting weren't addressed earlier, they could rear up again and possibly spur violent acts, Greden says.

And the young man's call to his girlfriend — asking that she not forget him, pointedly saying "goodbye" when he always said "see you later," calling her "Jessica" instead of "Jesse" — is behavior that should set off alarm bells, says psychiatrist Harold Koplewicz, director of the New York University Child Study Center.

There are almost always such warning signs if someone is about to commit suicide or mass killings, he says. "People are embarrassed to intervene, but they should go see a person who seems to be saying goodbye or acting out of character.

"Let the person know you don't want them to go anywhere or do anything till you get there. If they won't listen to you, contact their parents, roommates or someone else. Reach out to see that they get some kind of help," Koplewicz says.

The person involved may get angry, he says, "but ignoring the signs they've thrown out can be much, much worse."

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