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## Sandy Hook Responder: 'I Hope I'm Not Broken'

— Doctor arrived on scene an hour after shooting, worked with SWAT team

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*Some healthcare professionals see blood and death every day, yet certain days are worse than others -- like when a dozen police officers are gunned down or 20 kids are killed in their elementary school. As public mass shootings happen nearly [every 6 weeks](#) in America, these tragedies are having a more frequent impact on the healthcare workforce.*

*Given only limited research on burnout following mass casualty events, and as part of an ongoing effort by MedPage Today to explore job stress and burnout among healthcare professionals, reporter Shannon Firth talked at length with doctors and nurses about their personal experiences with mass shootings and how their lives and careers were affected.*

*For the main series, [click here](#).*

Rich Kamin, MD, arrived on the scene of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting about an hour after it occurred. While he wasn't the first medical provider there, he was the first doctor to show up.

He and the other medical responders were tasked with re-evaluating the work that had already been done, but in reality, their job was to make sure the victims who hadn't been moved were in fact dead. And they were.

"I didn't provide any medical care that day," Kamin said.

He had walked into the school knowing he was doing what he'd been trained for. But

when he left the building, everything changed.

"After I saw what I saw, I really thought to myself, 'I hope I'm not broken, because my wife is going to be so pissed if I come home broken.'"

Kamin, who is the EMS program director for the University of Connecticut Health Center, was one of many people whose lives were changed on Dec. 14, 2012, when a gunman killed 27 people, 20 of them children.

### **'My Kids' Faces on Theirs'**

Kamin's voice started to break as he remembered calling his wife after leaving the building. He knew she had always been "unsettled" about his work with law enforcement, providing medical support via three SWAT teams in Connecticut.

"I remember hearing her voice and just being so glad that she was okay and that the kids were okay and telling her ... how much I love her," Kamin said.

His day didn't end then: he and his team went to the shooter's mother's house -- she had been killed too -- and then back to the school.

It was early December so it was already starting to get dark when he got home in the late afternoon. As he was unpacking his car, his boss, Robert Fuller, MD, chair of emergency medicine at the University of Connecticut Health, phoned.

Fuller, in a matter-of-fact tone, laid out what Kamin should expect after seeing and experiencing what he did.

He said that it isn't uncommon to have trouble sleeping, to have intrusive thoughts or trouble concentrating, and that he might be quicker to anger or grow sad, Kamin said.

"It wasn't that Rob had said, 'I've been there and I've done that,'" Kamin said. But then he didn't need to; Kamin knew his boss's history.

Fuller had been at Banda Aceh, Indonesia, after the 2004 tsunami, and in Haiti hours after the 2010 earthquake -- "taking care of throngs of horribly injured people in a completely unresourced environment," Kamin said.

"And Rob said, 'What I want you to do is, I want you to exercise everyday. I want you to stay in contact. In fact I'm going to come pick you up tomorrow, we'll go to the gym.'" He encouraged him to eat properly and to get as much sleep as he could, and said, "I'll see you in the morning."

Many of the experiences Fuller described quickly became real for Kamin.

"I was that evening already having intrusive thoughts ... where I could see my kids' faces on some of the kids I had taken care of, or at least examined that day, and so it was already starting," he said.

"And so when Fuller said, 'Listen man, you're not broken, this is what you should expect,' I was relieved," Kamin said.

Fuller also told him to take some time off. He didn't forbid him from working but encouraged him not to.

### **The 3 a.m. Email**

The next day, after going to the gym with his boss, Kamin met with subject matter experts from the FBI's employee assistance program who repeated the same information Fuller had mentioned.

"Not only did they tell me which symptoms to watch for, they said, 'This is what you can do to try to help yourself. Stay in contact with people, talk to people that you trust, if you want to go to debriefs, go to debriefs. Don't feel like there's anything mandatory about having to tell your story.'"

They told him to make sure he was sleeping and, if he wasn't, to find someone to talk to. They warned him not to use drugs or alcohol to suppress his feelings.

"So I got that message twice in a very short amount of time and I found myself going through all of that," Kamin said.

He wasn't sleeping much at first.

"There were a number of emails written at 3 o'clock in the morning to other guys that were writing emails at 3 o'clock in the morning because it was hard to sleep," Kamin said.

Dropping his children off at their elementary school after the shooting was also "quite activating," Kamin said dryly.

While his children's school looks nothing like Sandy Hook, "the halls are still narrow and the backpacks are still there."

"I got legitimately anxious," he said, "I wanted to know where the exit was."

Again he recognized what he'd been told to expect: he'd have thoughts, but that's all they were. He'd need to be patient, the FBI counselors said.

"If you feel sad, feel sad," Kamin was told. "If you start to feel anxious, feel anxious. If you have an intrusive thought, best maybe not to try to actively try to push it out, just let it

go out."

And Kamin listened. "I gave myself some slack."

### **Easing Painful Memories**

Kamin said another thing that helped him recover from the Sandy Hook shooting was a chance encounter with a psychologist he'd seen in the past for marriage counseling.

She asked how he was doing. He replied, "not good," and said he had been one of the responders to the Sandy Hook shooting. She then told him that while she does marriage counseling, her real specialty is trauma.

She told Kamin about a "well-used, well-studied" but "not well-understood" treatment that she thought could help him.

Sometimes an unusual traumatic event can "get stalled" in your brain, and an unusual treatment called [Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing](#) that uses hand or eye movement can somehow help to get the brain unstuck.

"It helps you kind of unlock and work through what was very activating," Kamin explained.

He was instructed to go back through about a dozen bothersome images, describing how he felt, emotionally and physically, when those images surfaced. For example, when he thought of his friend, a fellow first responder, kneeling and crossing himself, it made him anxious and he felt a tightening in his shoulders and his chest.

Then he would think about individual images while his psychologist guided his eyes left to right, back and forth with her fingers. (There are variations of the treatment, but what worked for Kamin was the eye movement.)

Afterwards, he would re-evaluate how he felt when he thought about the images, giving each a grade in terms of the level of "activation." Then the process repeated.

It's that back and forth component that loosens up those stalled memories and helps to weaken those emotional and physical responses, he said.

"And for me it was amazing. It was a very, very satisfying process because ... over the course of about 6 sessions I was able to dramatically, drastically reduce the amount of activation," from those images, he said.

Kamin would never say that he's a better person because of what he experienced at Sandy Hook, but he's a different person.

They call it "post-traumatic growth," he said.

He's not broken, he said. He doesn't have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He's spoken about his experience at different conferences for clinicians and for law enforcement.

He still works with the same three SWAT teams and while he recognizes that his experience at Sandy Hook "wasn't a happy time," it strengthened the bond between him and the other first responders.

"Some of us still work together and even the ones that aren't still on the team, we're still close," he said.

### **Learning From Loss**

After Sandy Hook, Kamin said he felt very "disingenuous" when he was training clinicians and other police officers to prepare for the possibility of a mass shooting "without making sure that I included at least something about the reality of what might happen to them emotionally."

"Police officers, firefighters, EMS, physicians, nurses ... social workers ... All of these people sacrifice one way or another ... to keep us safe or allow us to live a certain quality of life ... and if we're not being honest with ourselves ... if we're not taking care of people while we understand that there are risks, then to some extent, we're asking them to be potentially disposable and that's completely unacceptable."

The research on conditions like acute stress and PTSD is well enough understood that educators should be able to help others understand what to expect.

"And then, at least to some extent, be able to prepare and provide services for these folks if and when they're affected," Kamin said.