

# Navigating Trauma

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This handbook offers trauma recovery insights, resources and guidance regarding the Dec. 6 shooting at UNLV.



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# Introduction

The Intersection, UNLV's Academic Multicultural Resource Center, has carefully created this handbook to aid in understanding the wide-ranging impact of the Dec. 6 shooting at UNLV. It serves as a guide to grasp the mental health implications that often accompany traumatic events, highlights the Intersection's role in student advocacy, the Undocumented Student Program's support, and recognizes our office as a safe space for students to share their stories.

Each person's journey to healing is unique and deeply personal. We believe it is crucial to recognize and validate these diverse experiences, ensuring that support is inclusive and sensitive to the unique challenges faced by every individual within our community.

By coming together and supporting one another, we can heal. We hope this handbook offers comfort, guidance, and a reminder that you are not alone.

Together, we are strong.  
UNLV is strong.

# **TRIGGER WARNING**

This section contains details that may be distressing to some readers. We have provided an index so you may skip sections.

# December 6: A Day of Grief

On Dec. 6, 2023, at approximately 11:45 a.m. local time, authorities received the first reports of an active shooter at UNLV. This marked the onset of the deadliest incident in UNLV's history.



Although the first officer arrived on the scene within 78 seconds, chaos continued to unfold. Upon identifying the source of the gunfire at Beam Hall, the Lee Business School, LVMPD and UNLV officers moved in without hesitation.

The shooter, later identified as Anthony Polito, engaged in a gunfight with plain-clothed UNLV officers near the building's main entrance. Polito sustained multiple gunshot wounds and died by 11:55 a.m.

In a mere 10 minutes, the tragic events led to the loss of three lives. A thorough search of Beam Hall uncovered three victims, while on the fifth floor, a visiting professor was injured. Fortunately, the professor managed to reach the floor below before being taken to the hospital.

During a news conference on Dec. 8, the following quotes and statements about the victims were shared, reflecting the deep sorrow felt by the community.

## Naoko Tekemaru

"Naoko was a triple-threat artist," colleague Margret Harp said. "She was a professional concert pianist who left that career due to physical disabilities. She embroidered beautifully, creating her own designs. And every holiday season, she brought us her homemade chocolates."

## Patricia Navarro-Velez

"Pat immediately made a positive impact in the lives of students and her colleagues," Jason Smith, professor and chair of the accounting department, said. "She had a larger-than-life personality, an infectious smile, and a genuine kindness that made everyone around her feel like family."

## Cha-Jan "Jerry" Chang

Chang was a diligent researcher and dedicated teacher who had previously decided to donate his body to research upon his death, colleague and friend Keah-Choon Tan said. He explained that Chang's body was donated to another institution for medical study, noting, "It is a true testament to how much he loved teaching, research, UNLV, and higher education."





# The Emotional Aftermath

## Insights From Dr. Stephan Benning's Trauma Research

In the wake of Dec. 6, our UNLV community faced an unprecedented wave of emotional turmoil. To navigate this challenging landscape, Dr. Stephan Benning, director of UNLV's Psychophysiology of Emotion and Personality Laboratory, turned to his extensive trauma research to help us understand and cope with the profound impact of the tragedy.

Previously, Benning led a yearlong, comprehensive study on physiological trauma in the aftermath of the devastating 2017 Route 91 shooting. Drawing from this research, Benning and his team at UNLV have now turned their focus to the emotional aftermath of the Dec. 6 shooting. Their study delves into personal narratives, closely monitors psychological health, and aims to reveal the intricate impacts of mass shootings on individuals. While existing data offers insights into retrospective thoughts and feelings, understanding the immediate effects during the acute stress period remains a complex and critical challenge.

In this interview, we explore Benning's findings on the acute phase of trauma, his professional knowledge, and his expert recommendations for dealing with trauma. His insights are invaluable for those seeking to understand the psychological impact of such events and find effective ways to support recovery and resilience in the aftermath of tragedy.

**Q: What are the immediate psychological symptoms that characterize the acute stress period following trauma exposure?**

During the acute phase of trauma, which spans from three days to one month after the event, individuals often experience symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This includes intrusive thoughts, reminders, flashbacks, and trauma-related dreams. They might also exhibit traumatic avoidance, steering clear of physical situations or reminders associated with the event. Individuals may also suffer from cognitive distortions, having difficulty feeling positive about themselves, increased startle responses, and trouble concentrating. Overall, people have a wide range of responses to trauma.

**Q: How do the experiences of individuals near the incident on Dec. 6 differ from those who were further away on campus?**

Our study found that individuals who were near Beam Hall or the Student Union, or had direct experiences during the shooting, had higher symptom levels compared to those who were locked down or away from campus. Those who were in lockdown experienced more symptoms than those who were off campus. Proximity to the event emerged as a significant predictor of symptom severity and, potentially, their recovery.

**Q: How can a person's support system impact trauma recovery?**

Our research with Route 91 survivors and the affected community revealed that criticism from social circles—whether from family, friends, or coworkers—was associated with higher levels of PTSD symptoms, particularly in the first three months. Conversely, individuals who received support tended to report higher levels of well-being.



## **Q: What are the defining aspects of criticism or support?**

Following the shooting at UNLV, we conducted open-ended questions to investigate the types of criticism and support people experienced. We found that criticism often centers around how symptoms are perceived, with individuals feeling judged for their emotions, for not recovering quickly, or being accused of exaggerating their experiences.

In contrast, supportive actions involve being included in activities and social gatherings, ensuring individuals are invited to participate in enjoyable experiences. Supportive environments provide individuals the space to talk about what they are experiencing without judgment or expectations. Therefore, being given the space to not talk about Dec. 6 is also supportive.

## **Q: How long did it take for those affected to begin approaching their normal range of mental and emotional functioning?**

While we lack information on participants' specific psychological baselines, it appears that after approximately three months, the overall level of immediate traumatic stress symptoms in our sample returned to expected community levels. However, more than 10% of the participants still exhibit symptoms suggestive of PTSD, although we lack diagnostic interviews to confirm this. This indicates that a portion of individuals may continue to experience difficulties beyond the acute phase of trauma.

Importantly, PTSD symptoms are not necessarily exclusive to the UNLV shooting. Previous traumas experienced by individuals in the past may have contributed to heightened levels of PTSD symptoms in the aftermath of the UNLV shooting.





**Q: What effective healing strategies have you identified?**

One of the most important things individuals can do to support themselves is to actively engage with people in their lives. People often need others around to feel like they are still a part of the community. It's important to connect with people who offer understanding and acceptance without judgment.

Instead of questioning why someone hasn't recovered or moved on, supportive individuals are willing to listen and engage in conversations at the pace and depth that feels right for the person affected. On that note, it may be necessary to minimize interactions with people who are critical of their emotions, recognizing that some people might not be able to provide emotional support.

**Q: How do feelings of marginalization or stigmatization affect people's trauma recovery process?**

That sense of mattering is really important. Experiences of marginalization or stigma can significantly impact individuals' healing and their ability to engage in broader community activities. Finding a supportive community becomes essential, especially for those who have faced discrimination or feelings of being excluded from the dominant culture or majority spaces. The Intersection becomes important because it offers a safe haven for individuals, especially when they may not have other places where they feel a sense of belonging.

**Q: How can individuals best support someone who has loved ones affected by a traumatic event, such as Dec. 6?**

For those supporting loved ones affected by trauma, I recommend asking open-ended questions about their experiences and allowing them to freely express their emotions without judgment or correction. If you don't feel comfortable listening to their emotions, it may be better to just involve those loved ones in pleasurable and daily life activities.

People who have gone through trauma often struggle to discern what is safe and who is supportive, which may lead them to withdraw as a protective measure, robbing them of the sense of community and belonging that will aid their healing. It is important to reach out, extend social invitations, and support their social circle as much as possible.

**Q: How do you suggest approaching a person you believe may need professional help?**

If you notice that someone is struggling to accomplish tasks they normally handle well, it might be appropriate to gently broach the topic of seeking professional help. UNLV provides a list of available services for this purpose.

If you suspect someone might benefit from professional help, approach the conversation with empathy and support rather than criticism or judgment. Focus on observations rather than accusatory or critical statements like "You need help." Create a supportive environment by emphasizing what you see, feel, or notice. Create space between what you are noticing and what someone else might be experiencing.



## **Q: What is your approach to ethics in your study?**

It's important to recognize the challenges people may face in participating in studies like ours. That's why we opted not to contact anyone directly. Those who wish to share their stories can do so voluntarily, but we refrain from approaching anyone who may not feel ready. Our approach prioritizes respect for individuals' privacy and autonomy. As researchers, we adhere to best practices by treating people with the same consideration we would expect.

This key takeaway applies beyond research. If loved ones or individuals you care about don't approach you to share their experiences, it shouldn't be interpreted as a personal slight or lack of trust. They may simply need time to process their thoughts or prefer to work through things privately before discussing them more broadly.

## **Q: Do you have any final thoughts?**

Combating self-stigmatization is also important. Some individuals may feel pressure to be "over it" as time passes or if the topic isn't frequently discussed. It is important to remind people that we do not assume their struggles are just going to disappear. Remember, you are not alone; you are not deviant or broken. If you're still facing challenges, it's important to acknowledge this so you can reach out for support or seek professional help.





# The Intersection, Your Place

Amid the raw emotional aftermath of the Dec. 6 incident, our office, The Intersection, dedicated the following months to deeply understanding and advocating for the evolving needs and concerns of students.

We have many roles at UNLV, with the most important being our commitment to supporting student success. In that sense, we believe it is imperative to provide a space where students can freely express their emotions and articulate their wants and needs from the university.

"As university administrators, it is imperative that we listen to our students, understand their emotions and coping strategies," Dr. Harriet Barlow, executive director of The Intersection, explained. "This insight allows us to take proactive measures and advocate for necessary actions from higher leadership."

According to Dr. Ana Marrero Lopez, assistant director of The Intersection, advocacy plays an important role in how our office supports students across campus.

"Advocacy takes many shapes and forms, and it is not something that happens overnight. You have to be very strategic and thoughtful about how to intervene in a situation and create momentum longevity-wise," Marrero said.

Our office works in close collaboration with various groups across campus to drive effective advocacy efforts. First, our faculty engages with students to understand their concerns and needs. Then, we share this information with other faculty across campus to ensure cohesion and unified efforts. Finally, in decision-making meetings about funding and representation, our faculty network becomes a pivotal sounding board. We diligently bring these insights to the forefront, facilitating constructive dialogue, backed by thorough research and legal data.

“I hope that students see us as a safe place where they can come and talk about Dec. 6,” said Dr. Barlow. “If they don’t want to talk about it, they can still find friendship and support, recognizing that we all went through this together.”



# Strength Amidst Chaos

## USP's Support for Undocumented Students

The Dec. 6 incident sent shockwaves through our community, impacting each person in unique and profound ways. Amid the havoc, the undocumented community faced distinct challenges.

The Intersection houses the Undocumented Student Program (USP), which is dedicated to providing services, resources, and support to undocumented students and mixed-status families at UNLV. Immediately after Dec. 6, USP saw a surge in inquiries about U-visas, nonimmigrant visas specifically designated for victims of qualifying criminal activity.

“As undocumented individuals, we are always on the lookout for pathways to citizenship. Unfortunately, we saw a lot of misinformation being spread about U-visa qualifications,” Nayelli Rico Lopez, USP’s resource coordinator said. “It is not simple; there are many requirements, and it is very specific,” Rico Lopez said.

Rico Lopez promptly reached out to UNLV’s immigration clinic to collaborate and provide students with legal assistance, along with organizing information sessions on U-visas. She aimed for these initiatives to safeguard students against misinformation and avoid exploitation by “predatory” attorneys.

“There are situations where attorneys purposely misinterpret what the process is actually supposed to be, or they upcharge them for stuff that is very simple,” Rico Lopez explained. “These attorneys keep them longer than necessary without resolving their legal status.”

Many students were struggling to push through the shockwave of emotions, juggling concerns about their finals while evaluating their eligibility for U-visas.

“USP had a very quick reaction—it was difficult to do, but absolutely necessary,” Rico Lopez said, highlighting the program's crucial support during this challenging time.



# Mental Health & Counseling

## Community Resources

- **The Resiliency & Justice Center** offers services to address immediate visitor and community needs for trauma-related care. The center is a resource hub to address individualized needs and is working closely with crisis support services that are available to UNLV students and staff. Call 702-455-AIDE (2433) or visit their website.
- **The Stable Arena** is a resource for individuals who have experienced traumatic experiences; they work with the Victims of Crime program to provide services at no cost to those impacted by the December 6 shooting. Reach out by emailing contact@thetablearena.com.
- **The Nevada Psychological Association** has a list of Disaster Response resources including local and national therapists willing to provide pro bono services to anyone in need. You can check out their website at www.nvpsychology.org/.
- **UNLV PRACTICE** has compiled a list of local mental health providers who have volunteered their services and are offering sessions. Students and staff should mention the UNLV incident when calling 702-895-1532 for an appointment.







## UNLV Resources

- Students can fill out the **Student Support Form** (available through the UNLV Strong website at [www.unlv.edu/unlvstrong](http://www.unlv.edu/unlvstrong) ) to get connected to UNLV's many student support resources.
- **Student Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS)**: Contact [702-895-3627](tel:702-895-3627) to access support services.
- **The Student Health Center and Faculty and Staff Treatment (FAST) Center** will be open with full health care services available. Contact [702-895-3370](tel:702-895-3370) for more information.
- UNLV faculty and staff are encouraged to use the **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**. It is a UNLV-sponsored program managed by ComPsych. To make an appointment, contact [833-475-1995](tel:833-475-1995) or [800-697-0353](tel:800-697-0353) (TTY). The toll-free number provides direct, 24/7 access to a consultant who will answer your questions, and, if needed, refer you to a counselor or other resources. They also offer online, self-placed webinars on coping with crisis or traumatic event. Visit their website at [unlv.edu/hr/benefits/employee-assistance](http://unlv.edu/hr/benefits/employee-assistance) to register.
- **ComPsych** also offers online resources for gun violence victims and survivors. ComPsych services are confidential and available to UNLV employees and their dependents. To register on the ComPsych website, enter Organization Web ID: [UNLVEAP](http://UNLVEAP).
- **You@UNLV** is a free app available to students, faculty, and staff that centralizes UNLV's wellness resources in one place. You@UNLV also features resources for Grief & Loss and Responding to an Incident of Gun Violence.

- PEBP members have access to online therapy services through the **Member Assistance Program (MAP)**. Enter anonymously using the access code FP3EAP or call 1-877-660-3806, TTY 711. Members of the PEBP PPO plan have access to Doctor on Demand, which offers a variety of online mental health services.
- **The UNLV School of Social Work** is offering Zoom sessions to provide counseling to employees. Employees may contact Carlton Craig, director of the School of Social Work, [carlton.craig@unlv.edu](mailto:carlton.craig@unlv.edu) to set up a Zoom session.
- NSHE has partnered with **LifeWorks** to offer free online training on suicide awareness and prevention for all faculty and staff at NSHE institutions. Employees must register for a free account to access the training. For more information about the course, visit the NSHE website.
- The **UNLV Support Team** offers services to help you to identify a potentially difficult situation and provide you with specific ideas and resources if you encounter a student in distress. This includes a reporting system to share appropriate information so students can receive or stay connected to the academic support and student wellness services they need. For more information visit [unlv.edu/campuslife/supportteam](http://unlv.edu/campuslife/supportteam).



# Author's Note

Petra Molina serves as the Undergraduate Assistant for the Intersection and the Undocumented Student Program. She has been involved with The Intersection since 2023, and is currently majoring in journalism with a minor in business administration. She will be graduating Spring of 2025.

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As I heard the echoes of running and yelling through Greenspun's halls, the place that had been my safe haven for the past two years quickly turned into a nightmare. Since Dec. 6, I have witnessed how trauma can impact our lives in the most unexpected ways. Many nights, I woke up drenched in sweat, shouting, and gripped by panic attacks — and I wasn't the only one struggling.

I have worked intensely on this handbook to assist others who may be struggling with trauma related to Dec. 6. Please reach out for help if you are struggling—I've experienced firsthand the difference it can make.



