

Transcript — Spotlight: Desmond Patton

I'm Desmond Patton. I am the Brian and Randi Schwartz University Professor of social policy, communications, and medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. And for the last 10 years, I have studied the role of social media in gun and gang violence.

Q. Advice for parents talking to kids about mass shootings?

I think it's really important that parents and caregivers have open dialogue with their young people about mass murders and mass shootings — in particular allowing their loved one to ask as many questions as possible and to not shy away from the conversation. I think oftentimes parents want to shield their young person from these conversations, but they will receive it from a variety of sources. And so I think it's super important to have this dialogue. But it's also important to help them understand that they can be safe, that they should not walk around the world feeling this burden of concern around the possibilities, that there are a lot of people that are trying to keep them safe, that are working to keep all of us safe, and that they should rest assured that there are a lot of folks that are doing their very best to keep us safe.

Q. What about for adults scrolling through social media?

There is so much that is captured via social media and various media outlets, and I think the best thing that you can do is to have an awareness that this is a possibility, that in your own scrolling and navigating these various platforms that this might be a present and real threat for you. And so I think understanding who you are as a person and how you consume media is really important. And I think once you have that awareness, then I think you can also take control of what you see, right? So getting really familiar with the types of controls and features that your platform offers. And so if you're using TikTok or Instagram, for example, being very clear around the content policies and understanding how you can control what you see, what you don't see, is going to be really important because I don't think that this type of imagery is going away. But we all should take the collective responsibility to manage what we are seeing.

Q. How are young people using social media to process grief?

An important finding came out a couple of years ago, where we saw that a lot of young people were using social media to process complex trauma, grief, prolonged grief, loss, things of that sort. And then over a couple of days, within a two-day window, their posting behavior will become more threatening and more aggressive, as people might disrespect their grief, make fun of their grief, or nothing was done to support them. They would say this really profound and deeply vulnerable thing on social media, and it wouldn't be met with any type of support or resource. And so it really elucidated a couple of things. One is that a lot of people are not using social media for violence, that it really can be a promotive space for processing complex grief if we allow it to be. And, two, that there is an opportunity, there's a window, in which we can actually support people, but we need all the resources. This is not just an AI [artificial intelligence] or technology solution, but it requires all of us to be engaged and supporting people when they're reaching out to us on social media. And so if these digital signs of stress are

coming up in your community, in your Facebook community chats, through any of the chats that you might be privy to, that it's OK to reach out, to ask questions, to check in on people, to build a community when you're seeing people show these digital signs of distress.

Q. What other actions can be taken?

The reporting functions on social media platforms are a really important space that we need to be utilizing because then it signals to the platform that this is content that needs to be taken seriously and that either needs to be moderated in some way where it's taken down or that individual or a set of individuals can be redirected toward a resource that can be helpful to them. So these reporting mechanisms are extremely important.