In Quest to Explain Shootings, Probing Mental Illness

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN

What makes young people snap?

No evaluations or test results have been made public that might indicate whether James Holmes—suspected of killing 12 people and wounding 58 others in a shooting spree last week in Aurora, Colo.—is mentally ill. Before the attack, Mr. Holmes, 24 years old, mailed a notebook with drawings of a massacre to a University of Colorado psychiatrist, according to a law-enforcement official.

But the former graduate student in neuroscience at the University of Colorado Denver doesn't appear to have a history of abnormal behavior. Many knew him as a good student who was polite and quiet and often kept to himself.

The massacre in Aurora nonetheless has focused attention on abnormal or extreme behavior in the young. Serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depressive disorder, typically crop up in late adolescence or early adulthood, psychiatrists say. The peak age of onset is 15 to 25 in males and 15 to 30 in females. Experts are careful to point out that most people who are mentally ill aren't violent.

The onset of mental illness is often slow. Usually there are warning signs, such as social withdrawal, hallucinations, bizarre or erratic behavior and a sharp decline in functioning in several areas, such as academics, work and relationships, said Mark Goldstein, chief of the Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital and co-author of "Mental Health Disorders in Adolescents."

Other indications, he said, are speech that is nonsensical, disjointed or extremely difficult to follow, neglect of personal hygiene, and delusions, such as a belief that the person is being watched by others who would do him or her harm.

People who are suicidal sometimes signal their intentions by giving away possessions, writing goodbye letters or reaching out to a therapist.

"If you have a network of people around you, the warning is picked up," Dr. Goldstein said. "But if you don't, it won't."
The Colorado State Public Defender's Office, which is representing Mr. Holmes, declined to comment on Mr. Holmes or the allegations against him.

When the onset of mental illness is sudden—with few advance signs, if any—it is sometimes because a person vulnerable to mental illness has begun to abuse recreational drugs such as hallucinogens, methamphetamine or cocaine, said Dr. Goldstein, a pediatrician.

Mental illness has a genetic component as well, with a number of genes involved. People with a higher "load" of problematic genes have an increased predisposition to serious disorders and are prone to more-severe symptoms, including psychosis, a detachment from reality. A psychotic state, which may include hallucinations and delusions, often develops gradually over weeks or months.

"You don't wake up one day and have psychosis, like you wake up with the flu," said Jeffrey Lieberman, professor and chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University.

In some instances, however, a psychotic break can occur quickly after being triggered by a stressful event that exposes the psychiatric problem, Dr. Lieberman said.

Psychosis can be induced by a substance, such as a hallucinogen or stimulant, or by withdrawal from alcohol. In rare instances, it can be the result of an illness, such as a brain tumor or brain infection like encephalitis. In all of these instances, the onset would appear more quickly.

Still, Dr. Lieberman cautioned, "we need to resist the conclusion that all such instances of senseless, wanton violence are due to mental illness." A mass killer may be calculating, often a loner acting out of anger and a profound feeling of alienation from society, he said.

The classic loner "is not a popular figure, not a cool guy—women don't pay close attention," he said. "He's gotten to a point in his life where he expects more recognition or attention but doesn't get it and develops an alienated, anarchic, vengeful rage."

Dr. Lieberman said a friend, relative or colleague behaving differently may be experiencing emotional problems. "In the early stages of an illness, a person may be aware he is having difficulties but is embarrassed," Dr. Lieberman said. Suggesting that the person see a primary-care physician or guidance counselor is a good start.

"Err on the side of caution," he said.