



Violence and Mental Illness



In today's media reports about mental illness, there is a tendency to emphasise a supposed link between violence and mental illness. News stories regularly suggest that there is a strong connection between mental illness and crime. But the majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illnesses. In fact, people with a mental illness are more likely to be the victims, rather than the perpetrators of violence.

Because the media often quotes dramatic statistics to underscore their case, a look at the broader picture is essential. For example, studies have found that the rate of violence (defined as threatening, hitting, fighting or otherwise hurting another person) for people with mental illness is 3 to 5 times the rate of the general public. On its own, this is a worrying figure. But it is similar to how much more violent men are than women.

Recent studies have showed that alcohol and substance abuse far outweigh mental illness in contributing to violence. A 1996 Health Canada review of scientific articles found that the strongest predictor of violence and criminal behaviour is not major mental illness, but past history of violence and criminality.

Re-shaping beliefs is not an easy task. But it is important to correct the misleading information about this issue, because it leads to intolerance and negatively impacts the lives of people with mental illness and our society as a whole. Learning the facts about violence and mental illness is an important first step in building realistic attitudes about this complex issue.

Does mental illness cause violence?

Mental illness plays no part in the majority of violent crimes committed in our society. The assumption that any and every mental illness carries with it an almost certain potential for violence has been proven wrong in many studies.

There is a relationship between violent behaviour and symptoms which cause the person to feel threatened and/or involve the overriding of personal control. Examples of these criteria include specific symptoms such as command hallucinations and feeling that one's mind is being dominated by outside forces.

Current research shows that people with major mental illness are 2.5 times more likely to be the victims of violence than other members of society. This most often occurs when such factors as poverty, transient lifestyle and substance use are present. Any of these factors make a person with mental illness more vulnerable to assault and the possibility of becoming violent in response.

Who is at risk?

The pattern of violence is remarkably similar whether a person is suffering with a mental illness or not. People with a mental illness, for instance, are no more likely than anyone else to harm strangers. Violent behaviour by anyone is generally aimed at family and friends, rather than strangers, and it happens in the home, not in public.

Typically, spouses, other intimates and other family members are the targets of violence committed by a person with mental illness. Most of this violence is committed by men and directed to women - as is the case in the population as a whole.

Factors affecting violence

The conditions which increase the risk of violence are the same whether a person has a mental illness or not. Throughout our society, alcohol and drug use are the prime contributors to violent behaviour.

Another important factor is a violent background. Individuals suffering from psychosis or neurological impairment who live in a stressful, unpredictable environment with little family or community support may be at increased risk for violent behaviour. The risk for family violence is related to, among other factors, low socioeconomic status, social stress, social isolation, poor self esteem and personality problems.

Can treatment help?

Public information from the American Psychiatric Association states that people with mental illness who are receiving support from mental health professionals are no more likely to be violent than the general population. Regular therapeutic support from mental health professionals is a major factor in reducing the likelihood of violence.

In addition, research shows that aggressive community treatment-prevention programs result in low repeat offense rates for those people who do commit crimes. However, the misperception of the mentally ill as dangerous tends to greatly reduce support for social and community services. The stigma also affects people's willingness to interact with individuals with mental illness in the workplace and beyond. At the same time, this false assumption is leading to the public's greater acceptance of using legal means to commit people with a mental illness if they are perceived as a threat to others.

What can I do?

The misperception linking violence and mental health is based on fear of the unknown and the unpredictable. By learning the facts, friends, family members and colleagues can support individuals they know who have a mental illness.

Clarification and understanding can come from putting all the facts like these into context: the majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illnesses. As stated earlier, people with a mental illness are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence.