

Mental illness stigmatized

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In the wake of great tragedy such as the recent Arizona shootings, the temptation exists to isolate a single factor that can make sense of unthinkable violence. The reality is that a multitude of factors converged to lead events to unfold as they did. To focus on mental illness as the lone predictor contributes to its own tragedy; the false belief that people with mental illness are violent and should be feared.

Research has borne out time and again that mental illness, even at its most severe, is not alone a predictor of violence. The Elbogen study in 2009 outlined the top ten predictors of violence. They were as follows: age (the younger the person, the higher the risk), history of violence, gender (males are more likely to become violent than females), history of juvenile detention, divorce or separation within the past year, history of physical abuse, parental criminal history, and unemployment within the past year. It is not until ninth on the list that mental illness becomes a factor, and even then, it is only when mental illness exists in combination with substance abuse. A person with mental illness and no history of substance abuse and no history of violence is no more likely to be violent than anyone else in the general population, and in fact, are at two and a halftimes greater risk of being the victim of violence at some point in their lives.

Mental illness stigma is based largely on the false belief that mental illness equates with dangerousness. Due to stigma, individuals struggling to overcome a mental illness can face a constant series of rejections and exclusions. People struggling to recover from mental illness can find themselves denied adequate housing, loans, health insurance, jobs, and isolated from the support of friends, family and their community. Stigma about mental illness is so pervasive, it is often what prevents people from seeking help. The only way to fight stigma is with facts. The fact is that 26% of people will suffer from symptoms of a mental illness in their lifetime. They are no more likely than anyone else to become violent. There are things we each can do to fight the stigma. Educate yourself about mental illness. Be aware of hurtful language and challenge media stereotypes. Support those with mental health issues. Understand that mental illness is a disease, much like diabetes or cancer, and can be managed very successfully with proper treatment. Perpetuating misplaced and misguided fear only serves to prevent those who need help from seeking it.