



A Stereotype that Harms People with Psychiatric Disabilities

Does the myth of “the violent mental patient” cause harm to people?

Yes. People often avoid living or socializing with people with mental health challenges because they assume people with mental health challenges are dangerous or violent. As a result, these individuals often face discrimination in housing, employment and social situations. One in three people with mental health challenges report being turned down for a job once their disability became known. In 2000, an estimated 75,000 Californians with mental health challenges could not get needed housing. Stigma and discrimination can also lead to low self-esteem, isolation, and hopelessness, and may deter people from seeking mental health care.

Do the media promote this stereotype?

Yes. On prime-time television, characters with mental illness are reportedly depicted as the most dangerous of all demographic groups. One study in 1999 revealed that 60% of the characters depicted were portrayed as being involved in crime or violence. A 2005 survey of newspapers found that 39% of stories on mental illness focused on dangerousness and violence. There are few positive stories that highlight the recovery processes of individuals with serious mental health challenges and family members.

Do the public believe this stereotype?

Yes, to a large extent. The vast majority of Americans report that they believe people with mental health challenges pose a threat for violence towards others and themselves. The percentage of Americans who viewed people with mental health challenges as dangerous nearly doubled between the 1950's and the 1990's. The United States Surgeon General's report suggests that media portrayals influence these attitudes.

Has the stereotype been disproven?

Yes. Review of research on violence and mental illness has found that the contribution of people with psychiatric conditions to overall rates of violence is small. According to a 2009 report in California, "individuals with mental health challenges are more likely to be victims than aggressors." This is contrary to the media and stereotypical portrayals.

What is the truth about mental health challenges?

The 1999 landmark United States Surgeon General Report on mental health found: "Stigma is the most formidable obstacle to progress in the arena of mental illness and health." The good news is that people with mental health disabilities can and do recover. People manage their conditions to lead happy, healthy lives and actively participate in their community.

What is important to the mental health recovery process?

Community is an important factor in the recovery process as well as support from peers, family, friends and spiritual leaders. People can often benefit from access to talk therapy, rehabilitation, or a combination of recovery-oriented and self-help services. Contrary to media stereotypes, people with lived experience in mental health contribute to society and make the world a better place.

Where can I obtain additional information about how to address discrimination and social exclusion?

You can contact the federal Resource Center to Promote Acceptance, Dignity, and Social Inclusion Associated with Mental Health (ADS Center). It is a program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Mental Health Services:

Web: <http://promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov>

E-mail: promoteacceptance@samhsa.hhs.gov

Phone: 800-540-0320

You can also contact Disability Rights California:

Web: <http://www.disabilityrightsca.org>

E-mail: info@disabilityrightsca.org

Phone: 800-776-5746

You can also contact NAMI California:

Web: <http://www.namicalifornia.org/>

E-mail: nami.california@namicalifornia.org

Phone: 916-567-0163

We want to hear from you! After reading this fact sheet please take this short survey and give us your feedback.

English version: <http://fs12.formsite.com/disabilityrightsca/form54/index.html>

Spanish version: <http://fs12.formsite.com/disabilityrightsca/form55/index.html>

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