

It has to STOP

No More Talk of Violence

It has to stop now. We have to stop putting the words mental illness and violence together. I spent over a year of my life (combined) inpatient in psychiatric hospitals. I spend another year in halfway houses and treatment centers. I have worked for over fifteen year with people who have mental health issues. They are not violent people. We cannot continue to speak of violence as if it were a symptom of mental illness. Statistics show time and time again that people with mental illness are no more violent than the general population and I will tell you they are less so. They are much more often the victims, and not the perpetrators of violence. They are survivors of trauma of various forms who are doing their best to recover from what has been done to them and move on.

In the last twenty years I have seen less than a handful of people with mental illness act out violently. And none of them ended up harming anyone. On the flip side, I have seen adult staff unnecessarily restrain children. I've seen teens put into what amounts to body bags as restraints. I've seen hospital staff take down adults who could have been talked down. I've seen cops cuff people who would have readily walked away without resisting.

Who are the violent ones?

People with mental illness are sensitive, artistic, intelligent, generous, empathetic, funny, and sincere. But in truth they cannot be described in one way, or as a group, because they are all individuals. The term "mental illness" covers such a broad spectrum of issues and degrees. Like so many demographics they have been labeled with a set of characteristics that focuses on weaknesses rather than strengths, and are viewed through the lens of the extreme that applies to only a few.

Individuals are violent. They could be mailmen, housewives, athletes, store clerks – it doesn't matter how you categorize them. In the end they are individuals. But if you insist on grouping people, and you insist on doing so to those who have mental health issues stop lying. Your lies hurt other people and hinder the progress of their recovery. The stigma associated with mental illness is crowned with this false premise of violence and it keeps people from everything from getting jobs and housing to being treated decently by those around them. Worse still, it affects their own self-image and self-esteem. When people hear lies often enough, they believe them to be true.

It has to stop. There is no evidence. It is not true. People with mental health issues are not violent, by nature or by the nature of their illness. Again, I have lived the last twenty years with a mental health issue and surrounded by others with a variety of mental health issues. I have seen a lot of things. Violence is not one of them.

Stop. Now.

George V. Nostrand

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