

Harmful words about violence and mental illness

There is troubling language circulating about mental illness in our country, and to the south, and it can't stand unchallenged. The language is not just hurtful. It is ugly, and it is dangerous, and we have chosen not to repeat it here.

We are referring to public words and statements that reinforce the false idea that mental illnesses cause people to be violent. Fifty percent of media reports about those with mental illness depict them as violent,¹ even though people with severe mental illnesses are actually four times more likely to be the victims of violence compared with people without a mental illness.²

It's not just that certain language is coarse or impolite, or politically incorrect. When mental illness is publicly depicted as a violent threat and not a medical diagnosis, a diverse population is stereotyped and dehumanized. It makes a spectacle out of people with mental illnesses.

The data bears repeating again and again, because we, as a society, can't seem to shake this hateful myth. It just isn't true that people with mental illnesses are disproportionately violent, no matter how many media accounts or public statements are framed that way. It's important to take the data seriously on this because there's so much at stake.

The kind of rhetoric that reinforces this myth also whips up fear and panic. It plays on our anxieties about mental illness and can make us feel that we are not safe in our communities. It makes us forget that people with mental illnesses contribute to society as much as anyone else. It makes us think that people with mental illnesses are not part of our communities. The more we believe this, the more acceptable it is to exclude people with mental illnesses. They are, in fact, some of our society's most vulnerable people, and are more likely to experience poverty, unemployment, and social isolation. That's why programs and policies that advance the inclusion—not exclusion—of people with mental illness are essential.

A climate of fear can make us mistrust each other in a profound way. It prompts us to mistakenly question the impact of the great social and political progress we have made over the past several decades. It can also make people who are struggling with their mental health afraid to seek help, for fear that they will be labelled or shunned or worse.

It can also mean that we strip bare already inadequate mental health and social services, in favour of policies that punish, rather than treat and care.

It can mean that human beings are dehumanized, not only in language, but in real, tangible terms. This is the real danger.

There is a vast movement of people and organizations in Canada that has been calling out stigma around mental illness for some time now. And we've made progress.

We can't let the tide turn back.

¹ Whitley, Rob, and JiaWei Wang. "Television coverage of mental illness in Canada: 2013–2015." *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology* 52, no. 2 (2017): 241-244.

² Choe JY, Teplin LA, Abram KM, "Perpetration of violence, violent victimization, and severe mental illness: balancing public health concerns" *Psychiatr Serv* 59.2 (2008):153-64; Perreault, Samuel. "Criminal victimization in Canada, 2014." *Juristat*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X, 2015.