

Mental illness and violence

Research has shown that people receiving treatment for a mental illness are no more violent or dangerous than the rest of the population. People with a mental illness are more likely to harm themselves – or to be harmed – than they are to hurt other people. A person with schizophrenia is around 2,000 times more likely to commit suicide than they are to harm someone else.

A weak association between mental illness and violence

Violence is not a symptom of psychotic illnesses such as schizophrenia. There is a slightly increased possibility someone with a psychotic illness may be violent if they:

- Are not receiving treatment
- Have a previous history of violence
- Misuse alcohol or drugs.

Symptoms of psychotic illnesses may include frightening hallucinations and delusions as well as paranoia. This means there is a small chance someone who is experiencing these symptoms may become violent when they are scared and misinterpret what is happening around them. This is especially true when someone experiences these symptoms for the first time. However, if a person is being effectively treated for psychotic illness and is not misusing alcohol or drugs, there is no more risk they will be violent than anyone else.

Putting violence and mental illness into perspective

Research by the Australian Institute of Criminology shows that the vast majority of violence is committed by males aged 18–30 years. This is more likely when someone has been violent in the past and misuses alcohol or drugs. People in this group are far more likely to be violent than someone with a mental illness.

Schizophrenia and violence

People with schizophrenia who are receiving treatment are no more dangerous than the rest of the population. Research has shown that people with schizophrenia are about 2,000 times more likely to harm themselves than others.

Violence is generally not a problem, as long as the person is receiving appropriate treatment and support. However, it is true that a minority of people with schizophrenia can become aggressive when unwell. One reason for such a response could be a fear of symptoms, such as hallucinations. Aggression is usually expressed towards themselves, or family and friends – rarely to strangers.

Self-harm or abuse from others is more common

A Federal Government study found that a sizeable group of Australians with a psychotic illness (for example, schizophrenia) reported physical abuse within the previous year. For instance:

- 18 per cent had been a victim of violence
- 17 per cent attempted suicide or deliberate self-harm
- 15 per cent did not feel safe in the area where they were living. This highlights that people with a psychotic illness have the added burden of feeling vulnerable to harm.

Early treatment is the key to preventing violence

Mental health workers, people with a mental illness and their families all agree that the most important step in preventing violence is to make sure people receive effective treatment. Mental health workers need to know who is most at risk of being violent or a victim of violence and make sure they receive the right treatment – as quickly as possible and for as long as they need it. This is especially important in the first episode of illness.

It is important for everyone in the community to understand that mental illness is not a choice and could happen to anybody. It is equally important to understand that violence is always unacceptable.

How families can cope with aggressive or violent behaviour

If a family member with a mental illness becomes aggressive or violent:

- **Avoid a confrontation** – sometimes it can be best just to leave the person until they calm down and become reasonable again.
- **Speak firmly** – a very firm ‘please stop’ can sometimes help the person to regain control.
- **Have a plan** – know who you are going to call if the aggressive behaviour persists. This may be a mental health crisis team, police or a neighbour.

Where to get help

- SANE Australia Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263)
- Lifeline 13 11 14 or Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
- Your doctor for information and referral
- SuicideLine Victoria Tel. 1300 651 251 – for counselling, crisis intervention, information and referral (24 hours, 7 days)

Things to remember

- People with a mental illness who are receiving treatment are no more violent than anyone else in the community.
- People with schizophrenia are about 2,000 times more likely to harm themselves than others.
- Prompt and ongoing treatment and rehabilitation is the key to reducing violence among people with mental illness.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

SANE Australia

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