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Mental illness and violence

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Summary

- People with a mental illness who are receiving effective treatment are no more violent than anyone else in the community.
- People with schizophrenia are more likely to harm themselves than to harm others.
- Prompt and ongoing treatment and support are the key to reducing violence among people with a mental illness.

Research has shown that people receiving effective 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 far more likely to die by suicide than they are to harm someone else.

Mental illness and violence

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

- are not receiving effective 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 frightened 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.

Research by the Australian Institute of Criminology shows that the vast majority of violence is committed by men aged 18 to 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 effective treatment are no more dangerous than the rest of the population. Research has shown that people with schizophrenia are far more likely to harm themselves than to harm others.

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. These people normally express their aggression towards themselves, or to family and friends – rarely to strangers.

Mental illness and self-harm or abuse from others

A Federal Government study found that a sizeable group of Australians with a psychotic illness (for example, schizophrenia) reported that they had experienced 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 shows that people with a psychotic illness carry the added burden of feeling vulnerable to harm.

Treatment of mental illness and 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 as early as possible.

Mental health workers need to know who is most at risk of being violent or of being a victim of violence and make sure they receive the most effective treatment – as quickly as possible and for as long as they need it. This is especially important in a person's first episode of illness.

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

Coping with aggressive or violent behaviour

If a family member with a mental illness becomes aggressive or violent you could try to:

- 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 or you feel there is a risk of harm to the person, yourself or others – for example, a mental health crisis team or the police.

Where to get help

Your doctor

- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14 (24 hours, 7 days)
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 551 800 (24 hours, 7 days)
- SuicideLine Victoria Tel. 1300 651 251 – for counselling, crisis intervention, information and referral (24 hours, 7 days)
- SANE Australia Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263) (Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm)
- Need Help? [Chat live with a SANE Helpline Advisor \(Available Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm AEST\).](#)

Things to remember

- People with a mental illness who are receiving effective treatment are no more violent than anyone else in the community.
- People with schizophrenia are more likely to harm themselves than to harm others.
- Prompt and ongoing treatment and support are the key to reducing violence among people with a mental illness.

References

- *Mental illness and violence*, SANE Australia. [More information here.](#)
- *Schizophrenia*, SANE Australia. [More information here.](#)
- SANE guide for families, SANE Australia. [More information here.](#)
- Nielszen O, Large M, 2008, ‘Rates of homicide during the first episode of psychosis and after treatment: a systematic review and meta-analysis’, *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, vol. 36, issue 4, pp. 702–712. [More information here.](#)

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[If you are a compulsory patient under the Mental Health Act, you have rights and there are people who can help you...](#)

- [Mental illness explained](#)

[The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness...](#)

- [Mental illness treatments](#)

[The correct treatment for mental illness can help a person's condition to improve or help a person to live well, despite the presence of some ongoing symptoms...](#)

Types of mental illness

- [Anxiety disorders](#)

[Anxiety disorders are common mental health problems that affect many people...](#)

- [Bipolar disorder](#)

[Bipolar disorder is a type of psychosis, which means the person's perception of reality is altered. It is characterised by extreme mood swings...](#)

- [Body dysmorphic disorder \(BDD\)](#)

[People with body dysmorphic disorder constantly worry about the way they look...](#)

- [Borderline personality disorder](#)

[People with borderline personality disorder may exhibit extreme behaviour, such as repeated self-mutilation or taking overdoses of medication...](#)

- [Depression explained](#)

[The most important thing is to recognise the signs and symptoms and seek support...](#)

- [Eating disorders](#)

[Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups...](#)

- [Heart disease and mental health](#)

[Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...](#)

- [Munchausen syndrome](#)

[Munchausen syndrome is a mental disorder in which the patient fakes illness to gain attention and sympathy...](#)

- [Obsessive compulsive disorder](#)

[Obsessive compulsive disorder can have a profound effect on a person's life...](#)

- [Panic attack](#)

[Without treatment, frequent and prolonged panic attacks can be severely disabling...](#)

- [Paranoia](#)

[Paranoia is the irrational and persistent feeling that people are 'out to get you' or that you are the subject of persistent, intrusive attention by others...](#)

- [Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#)

[People with post-traumatic stress disorder often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event...](#)

- [Psychosis](#)

[In psychosis, the everyday thoughts that enable us to lead our daily lives become confused...](#)

- [Schizoaffective disorder](#)

[Diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder may be difficult because the symptoms are similar to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia...](#)

- [Schizophrenia](#)

[People with schizophrenia do not have 'split personalities' and they are not intellectually disabled...](#)

- [Substance abuse and mental illness – dual diagnosis](#)

[Dual diagnosis means someone has both a mental illness and a substance use problem...](#)

Eating disorders

- [Anorexia nervosa](#)
[A common misconception is that anorexia nervosa only affects young women, but it affects males and females of all ages...](#)
- [Binge eating disorder](#)
[You can recover from binge eating disorder with the right help and commitment...](#)
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[You have the potential to be a great support to your family member if they are diagnosed with an eating disorder...](#)
- [Other specified feeding or eating disorders \(OSFED\)](#)
[OSFED is now one of the most common eating disorders...](#)

Support, services and treatment

- [Antipsychotic medications](#)
[Antipsychotic medications don't cure mental illnesses, but they can reduce, or even eliminate, symptoms...](#)
- [Cognitive behaviour therapy](#)
[Cognitive behaviour therapy \(CBT\) can help you change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaving...](#)
- [Counsellors](#)
[Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek help from a counsellor...](#)
- [Early signs and intervention with mental illness](#)
[Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people's daily lives...](#)
- [Electroconvulsive therapy \(ECT\)](#)
[ECT can be an effective treatment for some types of mental illness...](#)
- [Mental health care plans](#)
[A mental health care plan explains the support provided by each member of a person's healthcare team...](#)
- [Mental health first aid](#)
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- [Mental health problems - early care helps](#)
[If emotional or behavioural problems are disrupting your life, it's important to seek professional help early...](#)
- [Mental health services - case managers](#)
[A case manager looks after your interests while you are a client of public \(government\) mental health services...](#)
- [Psychoanalysis](#)
[Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past...](#)

Living with mental illness

- [10 tips for living with depression](#)
[Try to do some activity every day ... 10 tips for living with depression...](#)
- [10 tips to improve your mental fitness](#)
[The brain is like a muscle – if you don't give it a regular workout, it loses tone. Here are some tips to help you improve your mental fitness: Exercise for 30 minutes every day. Physical...](#)

- [About mental health services in Victoria \(video\)](#)
[Victorian mental health services provide expert advice and support for people of all ages...](#)
- [Alzheimer's disease - Early signs \(video\)](#)
[Family and friends of people with Alzheimer's disease discuss their experiences and how to recognise the early signs...](#)
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- [Strong relationships, strong health](#)
[Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links...](#)

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[In Australia, suicide is the leading cause of death for males and females aged between 15 and 44. We can all play a role in preventing suicide by looking out for possible warning signs, reaching out...](#)
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[All suicide threats are serious. You don't have to be a trained professional to help a person contemplating suicide...](#)

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- [LIFE: Living is for everyone.](#)
- [The Royal College of Psychiatrists UK – Mental health information for all.](#)
- [Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health.](#)

Support Groups

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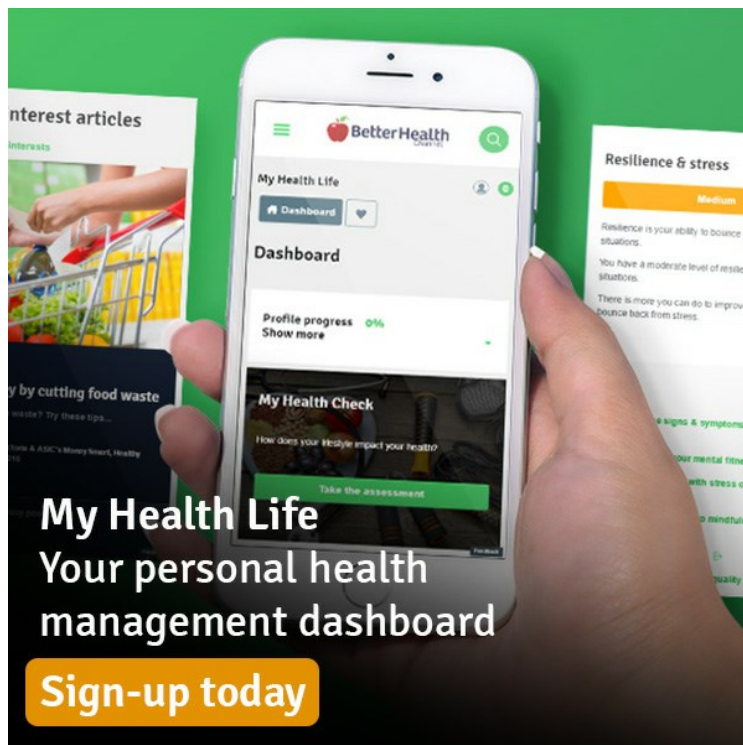
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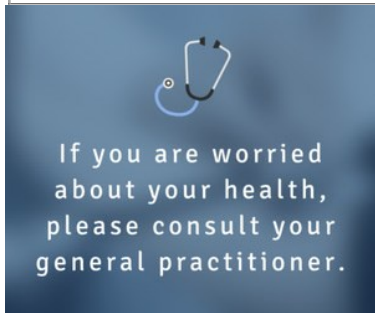
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