Mental illness and violence

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**

- **SANE Australia** Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263)
- Need Help? Chat live with a **SANE Helpline Advisor** (Available Monday-Friday, 10am-10pm AEST).
- **SANE Forums** are full of people who want to talk to you and offer support.
- Your **GP (Doctor)**
- **Lifeline** Tel. 13 11 14
- **Kids Help Line** Tel. 1800 551 800

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