Mental illness can sometimes be associated with aggressive or violent behavior. But people living with a mental illness and receiving effective treatment are no more violent or dangerous than anyone else in the community. People living with a mental illness are more likely to harm themselves – or to be harmed – than they are to hurt other people.

Mental illness and violence

Violence is not a symptom of psychotic illness. The relationship between mental illness and violence is complex. Research suggests there is little relationship between mental illness and violence when substance use is not involved.

Psychotic illnesses such as schizophrenia can sometimes be associated with aggressive or violent behavior. People living with schizophrenia are no more violent or dangerous than the rest of the population, if they are:

- receiving effective treatment
- not misusing alcohol or drugs.

They are more likely to harm themselves than others.

There is a slightly increased possibility that someone living with a psychotic illness may be violent if they:

- are not receiving effective treatment
- have a previous history of violence
- misuse alcohol or other drugs
- are experiencing active psychotic symptoms (and are responding to hallucinations or delusions)
- are triggered by fear (for example, if they think they are in danger)
- are experiencing psychotic symptoms for the first time, or the experiences are unfamiliar.

People living with schizophrenia are more likely to express their aggression, agitation or frustration towards themselves, or to family and friends – rarely to strangers.

Treatment of mental illness and preventing violence

Violence is always unacceptable. To prevent violence that may be associated with symptoms of mental illness, encourage and support people to access effective treatment as early as possible.

It is important to understand that mental illness is not a choice. Mental illness can occur in anyone.

Coping with aggressive or violent behaviour

If a person living with a mental illness becomes aggressive or violent, some suggestions include:

- Try to remain calm, and speak in a calm, clear and slow voice.
- Give the person some physical space.
• Avoid a confrontation – sometimes leaving the house to wait for everyone to calm down is more productive.
• Have a plan – know who you are going to call if the aggressive behaviour continues or you feel there is a risk of harm to the person, yourself or others. For example, you might call a mental health crisis team or the police (000).

Where to get help

• Your GP (doctor)
• SANE Help Centre Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263) (Monday to Friday, 10 am to 10 pm AEST)
• Chat live with a SANE Help Centre Counsellor (Available Monday-Friday, 10am-10pm AEST).
• SANE Forums
• 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)
• 1800Respect Tel. 1800 737 732 (24 hours, 7 days)

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

SANE Australia

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