

Mental illness and violence

People sometimes think mental illness and violence always go together. This is not the case, the vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent.

Are people with a mental illness violent?

Having a mental illness does not mean someone will be violent. People receiving treatment for a mental illness are no more violent or dangerous than anyone else. To make this clear, it has been calculated that the lifetime risk of someone with an illness such as schizophrenia seriously harming or killing another person is just .005%. It is much more likely that someone with a mental illness will hurt themselves, or be hurt by someone else.

Is there a link between mental illness and violence?

The great majority of people with a mental illness are not violent at all, and research suggests they are more likely to be victims of it. Violent behaviour is slightly more likely among people with a psychotic illness, especially in the first episode of illness, and is usually associated with other factors. It may also be associated with the type of person they were before the illness, and if they have been violent in the past.

Does having an illness such as schizophrenia mean someone will be violent?

Violence is not a symptom of psychotic illnesses such as bipolar disorder and 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, and are abusing 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 them may become violent when they are scared and misinterpret what is happening around them. If a person is being effectively treated for psychotic illness and is not abusing alcohol or drugs, there is no more risk they will be violent than anyone else.

Who is most likely to be violent in our society?

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

Where do people learn about mental illness?

The media plays a big part in the way we think about mental illness. However, news and entertainment media often make the link between mental illness and violence seem much stronger than it is. There is a weak link between mental illness and violence, but many wrongly believe all people with mental illness are violent.

What can be done to help?

Mental health workers, people with a mental illness and their families all agree the most important step is making sure people receive effective treatment. To make this happen, 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, especially in the first episode of illness, and for as long as they need it. It is also important for everyone to understand that mental illness is not a choice and could happen to anybody.

SANE Australia works for a better life for people affected by mental illness. One way of doing this is by letting everyone know the real facts about mental illness and violence.

How do I find out more?

It is important to ask your doctor about any concerns you have about mental illness. You can also call the SANE Helpline on 1800 18 SANE (7263) for confidential information and advice.

SANE Australia produces a range of easy-to-read publications and multimedia resources on mental illness. For more information about promoting accurate representation of mental illness in the media, see:

[SANE Guide to Reducing Stigma](#)

Describes what stigma means, explains the harm that stigma in the media does, and offers ideas on what you can do about it.

To order visit the SANE Bookshop at www.sane.org or call 1800 18 SANE (7263).