

Myths and Stereotypes about those with Mental Disorders

Myth/Stereotype	The Facts
Violent	<p>This common stereotype is vastly exaggerated by the media. In fact, although some mental disorders (anti-social personality disorder and the acute stage of some psychotic disorders) do have aggression and violence as possible symptoms, recent research has shown that using alcohol and drugs is a much more reliable predictor of violent behavior than is mental disorder. It is only when a mentally ill person abuses alcohol and illegal drugs that they are somewhat more likely than a non-mentally ill person to be violent. By any measure, however, the vast majority of violent acts are committed by people without mental disorder.</p>
Comical	<p>The media sometimes depict the experience of mental illness as being comical. This is disrespectful of the agony of those in these circumstances, and can be harmful to them.</p>
Not curable, or poor outcome	<p>As many as 80 percent of people suffering from mental illnesses can effectively return to normal, productive lives if they receive appropriate treatment. Many others can have their suffering significantly reduced.</p>
Morally deficient; God's judgment for sinful behavior	<p>This was the prevailing thought before the 18th century when the need for humane care became widely recognized. It has no place in today's world.</p>
Fear that it is 'catching'	<p>You do not develop a mental disorder by being around someone with one.</p>

Mentally ill people are unreliable and unpredictable

For some disorders this may be true when a person is in a crisis, but is not generally true otherwise, and it is not true for all disorders.

Some people "don't believe in" mental disorders or psychotherapy

The facts that these disorders respond to clinical treatment and that they can be devastating to a person's life belie the belief that they are feigned.

Spiritual experiences of mentally ill are not true religious experiences

Many people with and without mental disorders have mystical experiences. The true meaning of the experience depends on the meaning felt by the person having the experience.

You cannot communicate with people with mental disorders

Although symptoms of some mental disorders involve disturbances in communication, most people with mental disorders, even those in acute psychiatric stress, can communicate with others and tell at least some of what is happening with them.

Mental illness is evidence of character flaws, and you are weak if you need to seek help

Tragically, this baseless stereotype keeps many people from getting the help they need, and that is readily available.

Mental illness is a result of poor parenting

Mental illness is caused by a variety of inherited and environmental factors. Abusive parenting can contribute to mental disorders. But, good parenting may not be able to shield a child from mental illness, since many causative factors are not in the power of a parent to affect.

People with mental disorders have nothing to contribute to society

This is patently untrue. Many of the most creative artists, poets and writers have lived with some sort of mental disorder. Since 20% of the population will develop a mental disorder every year, clearly there are millions of people with mental disorders who contribute to society.

People with mental disorders have bizarre, disruptive behavior

While it is true that some mental disorders involve disruptive behavior, most disorders do not. If guidelines on appropriate behavior are in place, disruption from any person with or without a mental disorder can be limited.

Stereotypes about People with Mental Illness

COMMON STEREOTYPES:

Below are the most common stereotypes about people with mental health conditions followed by the truth. Endorsement of these stereotypes can lead to [prejudice](#).

STEREOTYPE: People with mental illness are dangerous and unpredictable. This is the most prevalent stereotype about people with mental health conditions. It is reinforced on a daily basis by popular media, including the news media. Several studies have found that news coverage of people with mental illness in the United States are far more likely to be about violence than news coverage in other countries.

REALITY: Most people with mental illness never commit acts of violence and are more likely than others to be victims of violence. The reality is that people who do not have mental health conditions commit most violent crimes. In fact, according to data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, only 3% of people with mental illness are violent. That means 97% of people with mental illness are not violent.

STEREOTYPE: People with mental illness are incompetent. This stereotype is also very pervasive. Popular media furthers this stereotype as well by portraying people with mental illness as wildly irrational or childlike.

REALITY: This stereotype could not be further from the truth. Examples such as Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Ernest Hemmingway demonstrate that incompetence need not accompany a mental health condition.

STEREOTYPE: People with mental illness deserve blame for their conditions. While this stereotype has lessened somewhat in recent years, it is still very common. It can also be expressed as people with mental illness are weak or have character flaws that lead to their conditions.

REALITY: As research has shown, life experiences, trauma, and biology are to blame for mental illness, not the person with the diagnosis.

STEREOTYPE: People with mental illness have little hope for recovery. This stereotype would have you believe that a person with a mental illness is irretrievably damaged.

REALITY: Research has shown that most people who receive treatment do improve, including those with serious conditions like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Sadly, one of the reasons some people with diagnosable conditions do not seek treatment is because they believe this stereotype.