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Unfounded fears

The mentally ill need understanding not stigmatization

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Tragic incidents involving people identified as having mental-health problems recently have been reported in Allegheny County. While rare, such events are unsettling to those of us within the behavioral-health community as well as to the general public.

Not surprisingly, many people believe that all individuals with mental illness pose a potential threat. This common misperception is fueled by high-profile and sensational news reports linking violence and mental illness, as well as by television and film portrayals of people with mental illness as violent criminals.

When, in the aftermath of a horrific shooting spree on a college campus, we learn that the perpetrator had a history of mental instability, it's easy to assume the worst about people with mental illness. This perceived risk exacerbates fear and mistrust. As a result, people are reluctant to interact with those who have mental illness. They may label them, shun them and discriminate against them. Stigmatization, in turn, can cause people not to seek treatment they need or from which they would benefit.

As my colleagues and I travel throughout Allegheny County, we regularly hear these fears verbalized. Far too often, people with mental illness are unfairly painted with a broad brush.

Research shows that there is very little risk of violence or harm to a stranger from casual contact with an individual who has a mental disorder. The vast majority of individuals with mental illness are not dangerous. In fact, people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence and are more likely to harm themselves than hurt others.

A study by North Carolina State University and Duke University found that people with severe mental illness -- schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or psychosis -- are two and a half times more likely to be attacked, raped or mugged than the general population.

As a psychiatrist trained to help people who struggle with mental illness, I have witnessed tremendous strides in our depth of understanding of mental health and mental illness. As our understanding has grown over the past few decades, so has our ability to treat people. People can, and do, recover. They live independently, hold jobs and raise families. I see these successes every day.

Treatment for mental illness, not unlike treatment for physical health conditions, requires a comprehensive, consistent and holistic approach. People who are fully engaged in their care -- those with the support not only of professionals but also of their families, friends and communities -- are most likely to succeed.

Failures happen when psychiatric disorders remain undiagnosed or untreated. They may also be the result of people giving up on treatment or failing to take prescribed medications.

It is estimated that up to one in four adults have some form of diagnosable mental disorder in any given year. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, millions of Americans affected by mental illness remain untreated or under-treated.

It's critical that we remove obstacles to care. Obstacles include, but are not limited to, a reluctance to seek help due to fear, the social stigma attached to mental illness, a lack of knowledge about where to find care and a lack of insurance coverage.

With last month's passage of the mental-health parity bill -- which requires insurers to provide coverage for mental-health care that is comparable to what they provide for physical ailments -- we have an opportunity to close one large gap in our health-care system that has historically presented a barrier to treatment. That is a welcome and overdue step in the right direction.

We also must ensure that programs are accessible to all those who need them, especially the most vulnerable among us. Community-based behavioral services provide vital care and support for people with mild, severe and chronic mental illness.

Insufficient funding of public mental-health programs poses an ongoing challenge to meeting the needs of those at risk.

Mental illnesses are real, diagnosable and treatable. With appropriate treatment and support, the vast majority of people will succeed. Despite our best efforts, a few will not.

As we work to support people on their recovery journey, let's not place an additional burden on them because of the actions of a small minority. Instead, let's continue to provide help and hope to people with mental illness so that they have the opportunity to live as productive members of our community.

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