



Multicultural Development Institute, Inc.

“Eliminating Health Disparities and Achieving Health Equity through Education and Training”

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America, you still don't get it: “Mass shootings are NOT A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM!”

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When we associate mass shootings to mental illness we are doing a disservice to the millions of Americans who have a mental illness, have found recovery, are living in wellness and have never shot anyone.

The fact that these two mutually exclusive issues continue to be associated and presented as cause and effect is beyond reproach. It is wrong.

Continuing to associate mental illness with horrific events only feeds the hysteria and the stigma and keeps people from accessing mental health services when they need help.

If someone feels like they want to harm themselves or others they should be able to access counseling or other support services without fear of shame or judgement. But stigma, lack of access and lack of funding keeps many from seeking help.

Studies vary but they show that 1 in 4 or even 1 in 2 people living in the United States will experience a mental health issue in their lifetime. If we know this, we should be rolling out the red carpet for people to seek help. We don't have to go through life sad, depressed, and full of anxiety, lonely or in other types of emotional pain. We should embrace that we have a mental health system that in most places provides a good infrastructure for people to find recovery and wellness.

I spoke to my 76 year old mother after the Parkland shooting and shared with her my strong believe that we must stand up and collectively say **‘mass shootings are not a mental health issue’**. She was surprised that I felt that way since I am a behavioral health professional and then began to tell me how the latest shooter did have a mental illness because he lost his mother and all of his social media showed how disturbed he was. I asked her where she got her information,

'watching the news' she answered. America: Losing your mother is not a mental illness!

Every day, by using multiple methods of distribution, the association of mass shootings, and other horrific acts, are being spoon fed to the world and wrongly associated with mental illness.

The most common mental health diagnosis are anxiety and depression. The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that approximately 20% of people living in the United States will experience a mental health issue during the year. About 18% of adults struggle with anxiety disorders like PTSD, OCD or various phobia, the most common disorders. Another 7% or so struggle with depression. Then you have conditions like schizophrenia, anorexia, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, and so forth.

Millions of Americans suffer from anxiety, depression and other disorders and many of them have guns yet they don't go in mass shooting sprees.

Having problems, grieving, being upset, and being angry are not mental illnesses. As human beings we all experience these emotions, but most of us don't go shooting others when we are having these feelings. If we are lucky we find qualified people to help us overcome these issues.

A recent story in Psychology Today provides some clarification about the erroneous link between mental illness and violence: *"The supposed link between mental illness and violence is so ingrained in our culture that stories like the above need only suggest that the perpetrator was depressed in order to satisfy a need for an explanation. Research reveals a far different story, however. People with mental illnesses are actually far more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of violence (Appleby et. al., 2001). Those with severe mental illnesses (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, psychosis) are actually 2.5 times more likely to be victims of a violent crime than the general population (Hiday, 2006). A 2011 study found that in order to prevent one violent homicide by a person with schizophrenia, 35,000 patients deemed to be at a high risk of violence would need to be detained (Large et. al., 2011). And yet the link persists. A 2013 survey conducted after the Newtown shooting found that 46 percent of Americans believe that persons with a serious mental illness are "far more dangerous than the general population" (Barry et. al., 2013)."*

Unfortunately some people feel that causing harm or death to others will bring them some relief for some problem or emotional pain they were having. But it is not due to mental illness.

The difference is that each one of us manages emotions differently. Some of us are taught to accept our emotions, to talk things out, to write in a journal, to exercise, to surround ourselves with loved ones who will provide comfort and

support and other techniques, including sometimes seeking professional counseling.

Yet, others are raised in environments where violence, excessive drinking, drug use, abandonment, or other unhealthy behavior is the way to manage emotions and going to counseling is absolutely not acceptable.

It is here where I believe we need to focus our efforts. Not in mistakenly blaming those individuals who have a mental illness or by justifying why we have so many guns available in this country. We must focus on helping young people learn how to manage emotions, how to navigate adolescence and how to build a sense of belonging.

Mass shootings are not a mental health problem, they are the result of individuals with access to guns who believe shooting others will bring them relief or misguided glory.

Let's stop the finger pointing and get to work America. We need to start early and help our young people succeed, not just academically but emotionally and socially as well. We can have a better society but to eradicate mass shootings we all have to do our part. What will you do today to help eradicate mass shootings in America?

References

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