What is the Main Cause of Stigma Against Individuals with Serious Mental Illness?

(updated November 2014)

SUMMARY: Stigma is one of the most important problems encountered by individuals with severe psychiatric disorders. It lowers self-esteem, contributes to disrupted family relationships, and adversely affects the ability to socialize, obtain housing, and become employed. In December 1999, the Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health called stigma "powerful and pervasive," and the Secretary of Health and Human Services added: "Fear and stigma persist, resulting in lost opportunities for individuals to seek treatment and improve or recover."

Recent studies have demonstrated that stigma against people with mental illnesses has increased over the past half century and is still increasing. Multiple studies have also shown that the major cause of this stigma is the perception that some individuals with mental illnesses are dangerous. Given this fact, it seems self-evident that stigma will not be decreased until we decrease violent behavior committed by mentally ill persons, and this can only be done by ensuring that they receive treatment.

Thus, campaigns to decrease stigma by simply trying to educate people will not work. The current situation finds an average commuter riding a bus to work, facing an anti-stigma poster proclaiming that "mentally ill persons make good neighbors," and simultaneously reading a newspaper detailing the most recent violent act committed by a mentally ill person.

I. Stigma against mentally ill persons is increasing

- In 2010, Pescosolido et al. assessed stigma against mentally ill persons using a 2006 survey that had been done similarly to a survey in 1996. They reported that stigma had increased during that 11-year period and that "significantly more respondents in the 2006 survey than the 1996 survey reported an unwillingness to have someone with schizophrenia as a neighbor. . . . Our most striking finding is that stigma among the American public appears to be surprisingly fixed, even in the face of anticipated advances in public knowledge."


- Previously, these same researchers had compared the public perception of stigma in 1996 compared to a similar survey carried out in 1950. They reported that, despite an increased understanding of the causes of mental illness in 1996, stigma had increased. This finding was also reflected in the 1999 Surgeon General’s report on mental health: "Stigma in some ways intensified over the past 40 years even though understanding improved."
II. Violence is the major cause of this stigma

- A 2012 national survey of 1797 Americans assessed the effects of a news story about “a mass shooting by a person with a history of serious mental illness” on the attitude of the public. The news story significantly increased negative attitudes to and stigma against mentally ill persons. The authors concluded that such stories “appear to play a critical role in influencing negative attitudes towards persons with serious mental illness and support for gun control policies.”


- A national poll of Americans taken in January 2013, one month after the Newtown massacre of schoolchildren by a mentally ill young man, reported:

  46% of respondents believed that “people with serious mental illness are, by far, more dangerous than the general population.

  67% were unwilling “to have a person with a serious mental illness as a neighbor”.

  71% were unwilling “to have a person with a serious mental illness start working closely with you on a job.”


- In 2008, a Harris poll reported that a majority of the public believes that violent behavior is a symptom of schizophrenia, and “roughly one in four Americans say they would feel uncomfortable around adults who have been treated for schizophrenia.”

  Schizophrenics battle stigma, myths in addition to disease. USA Today, June 8, 2008.

- In 1999, a man with schizophrenia killed two people in a library in Salt Lake City. According to a newspaper account, within hours Valley Mental Health began getting calls from frightened clients. “Clients were just sobbing,” said Connie Hines, public relations director for Valley Mental Health. They were afraid, she said, that the public
would want to retaliate against them and that whatever progress had been made in the de-stigmatization of mental health had been set back years by the shooting.

Jarvik E. Mental health clients fear growing stigma. The Deseret News [Salt Lake City, Utah], April 24, 1999.

- In 1999, a study reported that 61 percent of adults believed that an individual with schizophrenia was “very likely” (13 percent) or “somewhat likely” (48 percent) to do “something violent to others.”


- In 1996, a study of American university students reported that reading a newspaper article reporting a violent crime committed by a mental patient led to increased “negative attitudes toward people with mental illness.”


- In 1995, a study in Germany reported that, following two attempts on the lives of prominent politicians by mentally ill individuals in 1990, “there occurred a marked increase in social distance towards the mentally ill among the German public.” Although this social distance slowly decreased over the following two years, “it had not yet completely returned to its initial level by the end of 1992.”

Angermeyer MC, Matschinger H. Violent attacks on public figures by persons suffering from psychiatric disorders: their effect on the social distance towards the mentally ill. European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience 1995;245:159–164.

- A 1994 survey of Utah residents reported that 38 percent agreed that “people with mental illness are more dangerous than the rest of society.”


- A 1993 survey reported that more than half of people agreed with the statement that “those with mental disorders are more likely to commit acts of violence.”


III. How can stigma be decreased?

- The major effort to decrease stigma against individuals with mental illness has been through public service announcements, such as film star Glenn Close talking about her mentally ill sister. There is no evidence that such efforts have any effect in decreasing stigma.

Corrigan PW. Where is the evidence supporting public service announcements to eliminate mental illness stigma? Psychiatry Online. 2012; 63: 79-82.
Since violent behavior by individuals with untreated severe mental illness is the main cause of stigma, it is unlikely that stigma will be decreased until the violent episodes are decreased. This was noted as early as 1981 by Dr. Henry Steadman who observed: “Recent research data on contemporary populations of ex-mental patients supports these public fears [of dangerousness] to an extent rarely acknowledged by mental health professionals…It is [therefore] futile and inappropriate to badger the news and entertainment medial with appeals to help destigmatize the mentally ill.”


This has been noted by many others in the intervening years. For example, in 2012 former APA President Steven Sharfstein noted that negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness are unlikely to decline “as long as there are untreated, delusional, disheveled, threatening homeless individuals on our streets and in high-profile media examples of violence.”