

UNDERSTANDING STIGMA

As many as two thirds of Canadians who suffer some form of mental disorder avoid seeking treatment, for fear of how they will be perceived and how their lives might be affected. Under-reporting leads to under-provision of mental health services, making the situation even worse.

With so many people going without help, we see less evidence of recovery, so that prejudices against people with mental illness are reinforced.

Discrimination feeds on misinformation. Way down at its root, when it comes to mental illness, lies our deep-seated fear of unpredictable, horrific violence. And it is those violent stories that take a great deal of our attention, because they are newsworthy.

But to blame journalism for creating this situation is both unfair and pointless. More useful questions to ask are:

- **To what extent does journalism compound the problem?**
- **What can we add to stories involving violence that puts them in perspective?**
- **What is journalism doing to throw light into the dark corners of mental illness and the mental health system, to help vanquish enduring myths?**

Much excellent journalism has been done in this area by Canadian newspapers, radio and television. Many journalists, we believe, entered the business with a desire to make a difference, not simply to reinforce or feed on society's prejudices.

We live with illnesses, but as people we are so much more and many of us are very productive people, who live next door to you. By recognizing this, I believe the media could go a long way to reducing the stigma attached to people who live with a mental health condition.

Rick Owen, Journalist,
Kirkland Lake, Ontario
(Diagnoses: Depression and Addiction)

This guide is based on three propositions which we found were widely supported by mental health professionals we consulted or interviewed:

- **The lion's share of stigma is generated and reinforced by very rare, highly shocking, well-publicized instances of violence by people affected by very serious untreated illness.**
- **Attempts to counter the emotional impact of such stories by generating more positive news about mental illness are commendable, but unlikely to succeed on their own.**
- **Censoring or playing down coverage of major incidents of psychotic behaviour leading to death or serious physical harm is not an option in an open society.**

So what can journalists who recognize the problem actually do to make a real difference? We arrived at two broad answers:

- **Journalists should train some of their investigative skills on mental health issues with persistence, fearlessness and vigour. Ultimately, the best way to reduce the number of stories about horrific acts by people in psychotic episodes is to probe why these incidents continue to occur.**
- **In all their work, reporters and editors should be aware of the damage that can be done by reinforcement of stereotypes and strive to minimize it.**

The purpose of this guide is to give you some tools and ideas about how to do just that, and to do smarter, better stories.

For decades, people with mental illnesses were subjected to one of the most intense kinds of discrimination in Canadian history. They were shoved into institutions or attics or basements for years. We're still dealing with the echoes of all that. Stigma is not nearly as bad as it was, people are talking, but 50% of Canadians who have a mental illness or have it in the family will still not reveal it publicly. Journalists can help by bringing more understanding to the table.

Lloyd Robertson, CTV News