



Mental illness does not equal gun violence (Guest column)

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I am concerned and frustrated by the recent assumptions that the National Rifle Association, gun control advocates, the media and others are making between gun violence and the mentally ill.

Research clearly proves that mental illness alone does not cause a person to commit violence in numbers any different than the rest of the population; however it does, unfortunately, indicate that their chances of being the victim of violence are much higher.

As a mental health professional, this disturbs me deeply because it is a result of the many negative stereotypes of the mentally ill, the misconceptions about symptoms and treatment, and because there is so much fear about people with mental illness. We need to understand that mental illness is a medical disorder, in many ways no different than diabetes: not curable, but treatable. I struggle to understand the need to differentiate between physical and mental conditions; the brain is an organ just like our heart and our lungs – we don't call people "cancer" but we do call them "bipolar".

I would like to propose a different view about what could be a major factor in all of this violence. At a recent forum on school violence, a friend posed the question "Why is it (almost) always men?" and there were no real answers from the panelists.

A few days later I attended the National Children's Advocacy Center Symposium on Child Abuse and went to a session about boys who were sexually abused. The numbers for child sexual abuse are horrific: the statistics reveal that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be abused during their most vulnerable years.

The key difference is that girls talk about their experiences much more frequently. Men, however, don't talk; often they never tell a single person.

Furthermore, it is not just child abuse but victimization of any sort – neglect, rape, torture, bullying or being a witness to violence. And when people don't talk, they rarely heal. The effects of holding on to a secret like this can be devastating and include trust issues and fear of intimacy, inability to express emotions, isolation, struggles with stereotypes, fear of disclosure, addictions, depression and even suicide.

We know that victims, for whatever reasons, assume that they caused or attracted the abuse, and that they deserved what happened to them and that they are often plagued with feelings of guilt and shame.

When people believe they are bad, it's not too far a stretch for them then to act bad. I think of all the recent violence we have heard about. We know the profile: isolated people, ostracized, with low-self esteem, and little or no social support. If we can't reach out to those in our schools, our neighborhoods and our communities who show signs of possible victimization and help them get the assistance they need in whatever form (counseling, talking with clergy, support groups, sharing with family and friends, writing about their experience) then we are not going to end this epidemic.

All people, but especially men, who have been victimized need to work through their pain; they must understand that they are not to blame, that harm was done, that their abuse does not define them as a human being and that they can and must heal.

We have to begin to reach out with compassion and encourage all those we encounter in order to make this world a safer place. This means stepping out of our comfort zones and paying attention to our neighbors, reaching out to the isolated and maligned, and showing compassion. We must start asking questions, inviting others in and learning to recognize symptoms of both those with mental illness and those who have been victimized.

We need to know when to step in and when to contact local agencies that are trained to handle situations where we are uncertain how to proceed. We can no longer ignore the fact: in America today, there is violence in unprecedented rates. We don't understand why, but we point the finger at an easy target – the mentally ill. We must step back and seriously look at these crimes: who is behind them and why they are acting in ways that few of us are able to understand.

I understand that victimization is not the only reason behind the violence and that the vast majority of victims will never act with violence; but I do believe that often when we look at those who perpetuate violence they fit the profile of someone who has suffered trauma or violence.

Americans must understand the relationship between those who have been victimized and violent crime, the relationship between shame and self-image, and the need to reach out and help our neighbors find a path to healing.

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