The Truth About Mental Illness and Violence

Presented by
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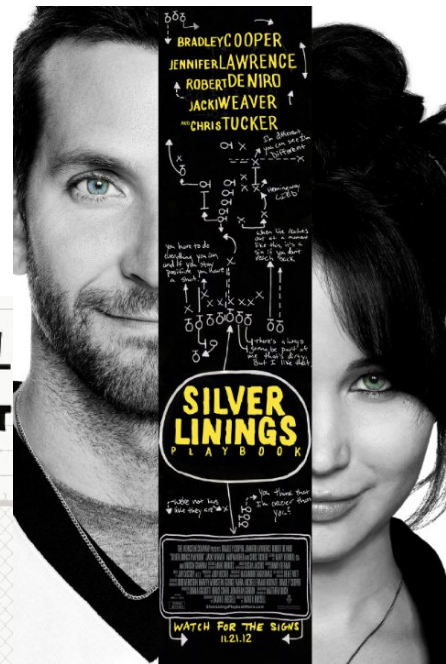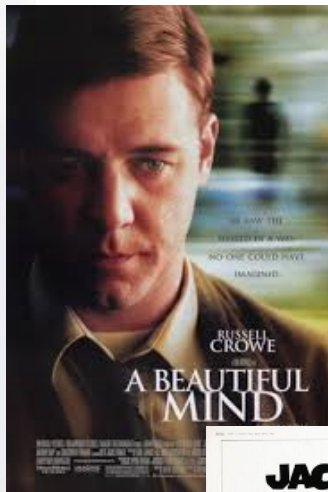Burrell Behavioral Health

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MENTAL HEALTH

Mental illness…

The betrayal of our language…

- **We don't talk about it well, if we talk about it at all…**
  - Psycho
  - Nut case
  - Nut job
  - Wacko
  - Circus freak
  - Gone mad
  - Cray cray…?!
  - Sickos!

Even those who should know better...

- With Dr. in their names!

Even those who should know better...

- **With Dr. in their names!**
  - "Are ya completely insane? Completely insane people go outside, suck on a rock and howl at the moon..."

Dr. Phil, you're confused, you're thinking of...

One of the few times it is actively discussed is...

- In the aftermath of horrific acts of violence...some would say as a red herring to steer the conversation away from gun control...?
- ALL of the major political candidates and pundits seem to make the connection...
  - Mike Huckabee, in the context of an interview on the latest mass shooting: "Do we need to do a better job on mental health? You bet we do!"
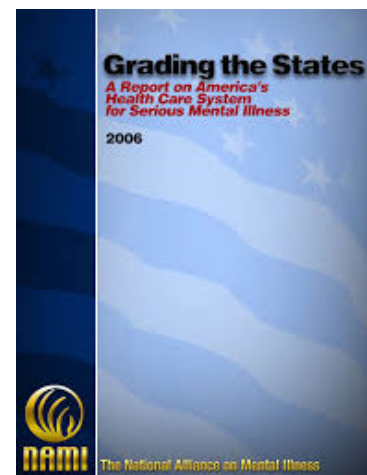
Trump's Sickos

- At the third GOP presidential debate, on gun-free zones: "...that's target practice for the sickos and for the mentally ill," he told moderators. "They look around for gun-free zones."
- He's not alone: 63% of those polled, and 82% of Republicans, attribute mass shootings to problems identifying and treating mental illness, but only 23% identified inadequate gun control laws as a root (Washington Post-ABC News poll, October 2015) .
- Trump's claims rest on BIG MYTHS we'll explore **today**—**MI causes violence/crime** and **the presence of mental health problems can predict violence.**

Trump's Sickos

- Standard practice is to raise the link between MI and violence after mass shooting…and it makes sense, right?
- It defies reason that a sane and stable person could commit such a heinous act.
- As the Donald put it: "No matter what you do, guns, no guns, it doesn't matter. You have people that are mentally ill and they're going to come through the cracks and they're going to do things that people will not even believe are possible." (on Meet the Press, Oct 2, 2015).
- It's true—many mass shooters, mostly young men, are determined to have shown signs of mental disorders…

But, context is important…

- "Legions of young men love violent movies or first-person shooter games, get angry about school, jobs, or relationships, and suffer from mental health afflictions. The number who seek to commit mass murder is tiny.
- "That's why sizing up a suspect's current circumstances is crucial: Did he recently get fired from a job? Did he lose his kids in a nasty custody battle? Is he failing out of school or abusing drugs?"
- **Mark Follman, Inside the Race to Stop the Next Mass Shooter, *Mother Jones*, Dec 2015**

But, context is important…

- As we'll see, decades of research show that the have shown that the link between mental disorders and violent behavior is small and not useful for predicting violent acts.
- Jesse Singal put it this way: the biggest risk factor for mass shootings is "basically, being an angry young man."
- There is no shortage of those in the population…so, it's next to impossible for anyone—psychiatrists, psychologists, parents, or police—to predict perpetrators.

When is the worst time to talk about mental health?

Probably…in the aftermath of a mass shooting or other horrific act of terror, because…

- The vast majority of those with mental illness are non-violent: **"Evidence is clear that the large majority of people with mental disorders do not engage in violence against others, and that most violent behavior is due to factors other than mental illness."**

    - Swanson, et al. (2015). Mental illness and reduction of gun violence and suicide: Bringing epidemiological research to policy. *Annals of Epidemiology*, 366-376.

When is the worst time to talk about mental health?

Probably…in the aftermath of a mass shooting or other horrific act of terror, because…

- The vast majority of gun violence is committed by persons with no mental illness: **"…fewer than 5% of the 120,000 gun-related killings…were perpetrated by people diagnosed with mental illness."**

  - Metzl & MacLeish (2015). Mental illness, mass shootings, and the politics of American firearms. *American Journal of Public Health*, 240-249.

When is the worst time to talk about mental health?

Probably…in the aftermath of a mass shooting or other horrific act of terror, because…

- Those with mental illness are ALREADY more likely to be the victims of violence than they are to be perpetrators of it: **"…adults with mental illnesses experienced violent outcomes at high rates, and…they were more likely to be victims than perpetrators of community violence."**

  - Desmarais, S, et al. (2014). Community violence perpetration and victimization among adults with mental illness. *American Journal of Public Health*, 2342-2349.

Spurious correlations, untimely conversations

- It is unfortunate that pretty much the only time we are guaranteed to have a national conversation about mental health is in the context of the horror and terror of gun violence or other kinds of violence.

Shark attacks and falling airplane parts...

- Which is a more likely cause of death in the US?
- Most people rate shark attacks as more probable...
- They certainly receive more media attention, and they are much easier to imagine (Thank you, Shark Week! Thank you, Steven Spielberg!).
- But, the latter is 30X more probable as a cause of death.
- The **availability heuristic** goes awry...the availability of the image (due to its emotionality, its potency) is a misleading indicator of frequency.
- Kind of like....

If you wanted to prevent gun violence…

- **On the basis of statistical correlation, you could make the case for denial of a weapon on the basis of:**
  - Living in certain cities that top the list of gun violence
  - Living in particular areas of almost any city
  - Gender—men commit the vast majority of gun violence
  - Age—young men between 17 and 26
  - Having previous violent misdemeanor or felony convictions
  - Frequent use of alcohol or other drugs

But you would not...

- Be able to deny a weapon on the basis of having a diagnosis of mental illness.

Mental illness and violence: Four facts

Fact 1: The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent.

Fact 2: The public is misinformed about the link between mental illness and violence.

Fact 3: Inaccurate beliefs about mental illness and violence lead to widespread stigma and discrimination.

Fact 4: The link between mental illness and violence is promoted by the entertainment and news media.

Source: *Facts About Mental Illness and Violence, School of Social Work, Univ. of Washington*

Mental illness and violence: Fact #1

Fact 1: The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent.

- Responsible for no more than 5 percent of all violent acts in the United States and further, the magnitude of the relationship is greatly exaggerated in the minds of the general population (Institute of Medicine, 2006).
- The vast majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illnesses (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).
- Far more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violent crime (Appleby, et al., 2001). People with severe mental illnesses, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or psychosis, are 2 ½ times more likely to be attacked, raped or mugged than the general population (Hiday, et al.,1999).

Mental illness and violence: Fact #2

Fact 2: The public is misinformed about the link between mental illness and violence.

- The proportion of Americans who describe mental illness in terms consistent with violent or dangerous behavior nearly doubled in recent decades.
- Also, the vast majority of Americans believe that persons with mental illnesses pose a threat for violence towards others and themselves (Pescosolido, et al., 1996, Pescosolido et al., 1999).
- One of the reasons, again….the availability heuristic…

Availability heuristic...

- A cognitive distortion first described by Tversky & Kahneman (1974).
- An experience-based mental technique for problem solving, learning, and discovery that finds a solution quickly through mental shortcuts to ease cognitive loads, using immediate examples that come to an individual's mind to evaluate and analyze a topic, concept, method, or decision.

Availability heuristic…

- Basically, the brain works to find a satisfactory solution, rather than an accurate, logical one, in order to deliver a solution to a problem quickly while reducing strain on itself. In the previously cited case, the "danger" of Ebola was emphasized and much more dominant in the news feed, and hence in the mind, it was the first example that was recalled when thinking of threats to health or mortality.

- However, when compared to deaths related to smoking and alcohol, the dangers of Ebola paled in comparison: **800,000** U.S. deaths per year vs. **1**, respectively.

Mental illness and violence: Fact #3

Fact 3: Inaccurate beliefs about mental illness and violence lead to widespread stigma and discrimination:

- The discrimination and stigma associated with mental illnesses stem in part, from the link between mental illness and violence in the minds of the public (DHHS, 1999, Corrigan, et al., 2002).

- The effects of stigma and discrimination are profound. "Stigma leads others to avoid living, socializing, or working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders, especially severe disorders, such as schizophrenia. It leads to low self-esteem, **isolation**, and hopelessness. It deters the public from seeking and wanting to pay for care." (New Freedom Commission, 2003)

Mental illness and violence: Fact #4

Fact 4: The link between mental illness and violence is promoted by the entertainment and news media.

- Characters in prime time television portrayed as having a mental illness are depicted as the most dangerous of all demographic groups: 60 percent were shown to be involved in crime or violence (Mental Health American, 1999).
- Most news accounts portray people with mental illness as dangerous (Wahl, 1995).
- The vast majority of news stories on mental illness either focus on other negative characteristics related to people with the disorder (e.g., unpredictability and unsociability) or on medical treatments (Wahl, et al., 2002).

Implication:

Focusing on mental illness is unlikely to achieve a significant reduction in gun violence, because the vast majority of shootings are the handiwork of people who do not fit the profile of those deemed dangerous.

Implication:

By shifting the debate away from gun control and toward mental health concerns, we increase the risk of further stigmatizing mental illness, discouraging those who confront it from seeking professional help.

Millennials may move the needle…

Millennials may move the needle…

Last year...

- About 31,000 people were killed with firearms
  - About 78 killed in mass shootings (only 0.3% of all firearms deaths)
  - About 19,345 were suicides using a firearm (62% of all firearms deaths)
  - Additional approximately 55,500 non-fatal gun injuries from assaults.
- About 38,000 died from suicide
  - Est. 90% of people who die by suicide have a diagnosable and treatable psychiatric disorder at the time of death
  - Almost 1 million people make a suicide attempt each year
- About 32,000 deaths in traffic accidents (1/2 drunk)

Source: FBI Crime Statistics

Mass shootings

- Such events are uncommon (0.3% of all firearms deaths).
- Frequency is not increasing, and they account for a small fraction of firearm-related deaths and injuries.
- Less than 5% of the world's population in the US, but we own more than 40% of all the firearms that are in civilians' hands: 250 to 300 million weapons.
- We may need a complete rethinking of the role firearms play in American life, but that is "the work of generations."

- **So, what can be done in the near term….?**

- *Source: Wintermute (2013), NEJM.*

Harm reduction approach

- Specific changes to our firearms laws, on the basis of existing evidence, that will produce measurable benefits.
- **First**, require background checks for all firearm purchases—closing loopholes for those 40% of all transactions involving private party sellers, who need not keep records and cannot obtain background checks.
  - most important sources of firearms for criminal buyers, and specifically for those persons prohibited by law from buying guns.
  - Loopholes are likely the reason that the Brady Bill did not result in a reduction in firearm-related homicides.

Harm reduction approach

- **Second**, broaden our criteria for denying individuals the purchase or possession of firearms.
    - Previous conviction for a misdemeanor or violent crime (e.g., assault and battery), about **nine times** as likely to be subsequently arrested for a violent crime.
    - With two or more convictions, the risk increases by **10 to 15 times**.
    - Alcohol abuse is a leading risk factor for violence against self and others.

Harm reduction approach

- What about mental illness?
  - The current lifelong federal prohibition: "adjudicated as a mental defective"—both offensive and ambiguous.
  - Several mentally ill mass shooters (including VA Tech and US Capitol) passed background checks and got guns from licensed dealers because their eligibility was uncertain or records were unavailable.
  - We need better data and criteria that take into account evidence that mental illness is treatable and that *the risk for violence among mentally ill persons is no different from the general population unless there is a history or threat of violence, or a history of substance abuse.*

Harm reduction approach

- Evidence that it works?
  - Feasible and effective.
  - California's denial policy reduced the risk of violent and gun-related crime by 23% among those whose purchases were denied.
  - But, state-level regulation by itself is insufficient, as guns will simply flow from states with lax laws to states with stringent laws.

Public opinion supports measures like these...even among gun owners

- NEJM Survey (2013): All policies bolstering background checks and oversight of gun dealers were supported by majorities of gun-owners, as were most policies prohibiting certain persons from having guns.
- A majority of members of the National Rifle Association (NRA) supported many of these policies as well.
- 84% of gun-owners support a universal background-check system for all gun sales;
- 76% of gun-owners support prohibiting gun ownership for 10 years after a person has been convicted of violating a domestic-violence restraining order; and
- 71% of gun-owners support requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of 2 years in prison for a person convicted of selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have a gun.

Public opinion supports measures like these…even among gun owners

- Other polls show 75-85% of gun owners, including NRA members, endorse comprehensive background checks and denials for misdemeanor violence; and 60-70% support denial for alcohol abuse.
- There is deep irony here—that our current policies leave out policies endorsed even by gun owners, let alone the general population.

Social withdrawal and isolation

- Much discussion of mental illness in mass shootings, but an important dimension that has been much less discussed is **social withdrawal and isolation**, both within and beyond the boundaries of mental illness.
- Mental illness alone is an insufficient explanation for mass murder—pathway is extraordinarily complex, involving a confluence of factors that come together only very rarely.
- There is reasonable consensus that Adam Lanza, and a host of other actors in these horrific accounts, were withdrawn and isolated early in life and that this persisted through adolescence.
- *Source: Walkup & Rubin (2013), NEJM.*

Social withdrawal and isolation

- Such behavior is quite common, often appears in early childhood, is relatively persistent and stable, and **can be very responsive to treatment**.
- Yet, withdrawn and isolative behavior usually goes undetected or unaddressed until impairment is obvious; at its extreme, it can manifest in shocking acts of murder and suicide.
- Ranges from lack of interpersonal reciprocity seen in autism spectrum kids, to avoidance/inhibition at puberty with anxious kids, to trauma reactions, to adolescent depression, to the schizophrenia prodrome, to budding sociopaths who are callous toward others.
- Early detection can go a long way toward improving outcomes for young people, since effective evidence-based treatments are increasingly available for each of these situations.

Social withdrawal and isolation

- The vast majority of people with psychiatric disorders are not violent, and the mentally ill do not commit a substantial proportion of violent crimes in America.
- When violence is perpetrated by a mentally ill person, it is usually in reaction to an interpersonal provocation and is often charged with emotion.
- Only VERY rarely do people with mental illness engage in planned, dispassionate, predatory violence against others.
- In school shootings, there has almost always been strong emotion involved, feelings of anger and alienation, with extended and detailed planning that went either undetected or unaddressed.

Social withdrawal and isolation

- Even if early signs were noticed, a mentally ill, socially withdrawn and isolated young man and his family would face significant barriers to full engagement in psychiatric treatment.
- Severely mentally ill people, especially when angry and alienated, do not often voluntarily seek treatment, and even those that do are often not fully engaged or cooperative.
- Young adults 18 or over must consent to treatment—families, who may be very concerned, often have little recourse—and our confidentiality standards preclude involvement of concerned parents unless explicitly authorized by the individual.

Social withdrawal and isolation

- Mental health professionals have capitulated to a higher threshold for psychiatric hospitalization, mostly because of the demands of payors/insurers, such that risk of serious harm to self or others is the litmus test.
- Clinicians may second-guess themselves, or fear civil commitment proceedings, and thus fail to advocate for higher levels of care.
- Stigma still represents the biggest barrier to effectively engaging individuals and families in the mental health system—but there's no doubt that fully addressing the mental health burden in America would be very costly. However, not addressing it would be even more costly.

Social withdrawal and isolation

- What about the "subculture" explanation?
- What is missing from many discussions is a focus on the seductive, powerful subculture that celebrates and advocates violent and antisocial behavior.
- Most people are not interested in and do not engage with this subculture, and most who do are not seduced into action by antisocial themes and violence in films, video games, written materials, websites, or interest groups.
- However, a very small minority of angry and alienated mentally ill individuals may gain a sense of belonging and support from this subculture, and may be particularly vulnerable to being seduced into antisocial actions.

Community based services are good prevention

- A constellation of effective, integrated, supportive community behavioral healthcare services represents a good investment in preventing criminal justice involvement for individuals with serious and persistent mental illness…

Law Enforcement Involvement: Outcomes of CBHO Services

- 56% of adults with serious mental illness come to Burrell services having had some law enforcement contact in the previous 12 months, which drops to 35% at their annual assessment (this is a **38% reduction**).
- Law enforcement contacts with no charges filed **dropped by 45%** in the year after engaging in care.
- The percentage of these adults with mental illness charged with a crime **dropped by 62%** in the year after engaging in care.
- Those convicted or pleading guilty to a crime **dropped by 61%** in the year after engaging in care.
- Those receiving a jail or prison sentence **dropped by 72%** in that year.
- Clearly, these are very large effect sizes, indicating significant relief on the law enforcement and corrections systems as a result of community based care. Keep in mind these proportions can be multiplied by about 2000 adult clients for whom we provide care in the SW region (The outcomes reported above are based on a sample of over three hundred).
- **Source: Burrell Research (2012)**

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