

# Dispelling the Myths of Mental Illness



Even though it is one of Canada's leading health problems there are still many myths about mental illness. Society is uncomfortable with mental illness because it does not seem like other illnesses such as heart disease or cancer. Until people learn the facts, they will continue to deny that mental illness exists at all or to avoid the topic entirely.

The media has done much to sustain a distorted view of mental illness. We are surrounded by stereotypes, movies about psychos or lunatics, jokes about crazy people, and news coverage that emphasizes the danger and violence involving people with a mental illness.

We can change the way mental illness is perceived and talked about by recognizing these attitudes and speaking up.

## Put the elephant on the table ~ it helps to talk about it!

### Common myths:

- *Mental illness is caused by a personal weakness*

Mental illness is not a character flaw, it is an illness. It has nothing to do with being weak or lacking will-power. People with mental illness can play a big part in their own recovery, but they did not choose to become ill and are not lazy because they cannot 'snap out of it'.

- *People with mental illness are poor and/or less intelligent*

Many studies show that most mentally ill people have average or above-average intelligence. Mental illness, like physical illness, can affect anyone regardless of intelligence, level of education, social class, or income level. One in five Albertans will be affected in some way during their lifetime.

- *People with mental illness are violent and dangerous*

As a group, mentally ill people are no more violent than any other group and are 2.5 times more likely to be victims of violence than to be violent themselves. 90% of people who commit suicide have a diagnosable mental illness.

- *Mental illness is a single, rare disorder*

Mental illness is not a single disease but a broad classification for many disorders. Anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, personality disorders, eating disorders and organic brain disorders can cause misery and missed opportunities for many Albertans.

**Words can hurt.** Words like 'crazy' or 'wacko' are examples that foster the stigma of mental illness. These words belittle and offend people with mental health problems. We wouldn't mock someone with a physical disease like cancer or heart disease. How would you feel if the person being mocked, and who was dealing with a mental illness, was your parent, spouse or partner, child, family member or a close friend?

### Contact Information:

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Counseling & Clin. Serv.  
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