Myths and Misconceptions about Mental Illness and Addiction

Beth McGinty, PhD, MS
Department of Health Policy and Management
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
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Two key myths:

Lack of effective treatment for mental illness and drug addiction:
► Treatment options for mental illness are **not effective**: 41%
► Treatment options for drug addiction are **not effective**: 59%
► There is a treatment for prescription painkiller addiction that is **effective** for a long period of time: 49%

Dangerousness:
► People with serious mental illness are far more dangerous than the general population: 40%
► People addicted to prescription opioids are far more dangerous than the general population: 56%

These views run counter to research evidence.


These myths contribute to stigma toward people with mental illness or addiction

**Figure 1**
Public attitudes about persons with drug addiction (N=347) and mental illness (N=362), 2013

- Unwilling to marry into family: 90% 
- Unwilling to work closely on job: 78% 
- Discrimination not a serious problem: 63% 
- Employers should be allowed to deny employment: 64% 
- Landlords should be allowed to deny housing: 54% 
- Treatment options not effective: 41% 
- Recovery not possible: 31%

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► Stigma is correlated with support for policy.

Higher stigma toward people with mental illness/opioid use disorder is correlated with lower support for public health-oriented policies:

- Insurance parity
- State laws expanding naloxone access
- Good Samaritan laws
- Increasing government spending on mental health/substance use treatment


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STIGMA ➔ Support for Punitive Policies

► In a nationally representative survey, higher stigma toward people with opioid use disorder was correlated with higher support for punitive policies:

- Arresting and prosecuting individuals who obtain opioid prescriptions from different doctors

- State laws requiring Medicaid beneficiaries suspected of opioid misuse to use a single doctor and pharmacy

News media coverage of mental illness

From 1995-2014, stories about mental illness focused more on violence than on treatment.


The most frequently mentioned solutions to the opioid crisis were criminal justice solutions focused on arresting and prosecuting individuals responsible for the diversion and illegal sale of prescription opioids. Less than 5% of news stories mentioned the need to expand treatment.

News media coverage of opioid addiction

News reporting about medication treatment for opioid use disorder increased substantially in 2015-16 relative to 2007-2014.

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Effects of violence and treatment messages on public attitudes:

► Messages linking mental illness with violence increase stigma

► Messages about societal barriers to mental health treatment (e.g., provider shortages) are just as effective as violence messages at increasing audiences’ willingness to invest in the mental health system, and do not increase stigma

► Depictions of successful treatment can decrease stigma
In conclusion, a word about language...

► Person-centered language: “person with mental illness/opioid use disorder”

► Commonly used terms have been shown in randomized experiments to increase audience stigma toward people with drug addiction, e.g., “addict”

49% of news stories about the opioid crisis used a stigmatizing term; 2% used a term shown to be less stigmatizing (e.g., “addict” vs. “person with a substance use disorder”)
Beth McGinty, PhD, MS
Department of Health Policy and Management
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
bmcginty@jhu.edu