

His and hers: Study examines the role of gender in the stigma of mental illness

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The mentally ill don't get a fair shake in this country. Many employers don't want to hire them, and health insurers don't want to treat their illnesses. Even within their own communities and families, the mentally ill are often treated with contempt and outright anger. There have been many efforts to combat the stigma of mental illness, but with limited success at best. That's in part because the stereotypes are so powerful: Mental patients are either violently dangerous or docile and incompetent. We fear the first and disdain the latter.

These are not equal opportunity stereotypes, however. The image of dangerous mental illness, including violent alcoholism, is much more often directed at men. Similarly, women are much more likely to be caricatured as pathologically dependent and depressed. Psychologists James Wirth of Purdue and Galen Bodenhausen of Northwestern wanted to know if these gender biases contribute to the harmful stigma of mental illness. Specifically, they suspected that when the mentally ill act "out of character," violating the stereotype, they might arouse more of our sympathy and leniency; if it's more uncommon, it's probably more authentic. By contrast, we might be more apt to blame and stigmatize the mentally ill when they conform to stereotype.

The psychologists decided to explore this provocative idea with a national survey. They had a group of volunteers from around the country, varying widely in age, education, and socioeconomic status, read a case history of a person with mental illness. Some read about Brian, who was a stereotypical alcoholic, while others read about Karen,

who showed all the classical symptoms of major depression. Still others read switched-around versions of these cases, so that Karen was the one abusing alcohol and Brian was depressed. The idea was to see if the typicality of Brian and Karen's symptoms (or lack of it) shaped the volunteers' reactions and judgments.

And it did, without question. As reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, the volunteers expressed more anger and disgust - and less sympathy - toward Brian the alcoholic than toward Karen the alcoholic, and vice versa for depression. They were also more willing to help Brian and Karen when they suffered from an atypical disorder. Most striking of all, the volunteers were much more likely to view Brian's depression (and Karen's alcoholism) as genuine biological disorders - rather than character defects or matters of personal irresponsibility. What this suggests is that stigma-busting campaigns need to closely consider the potentially powerful role of intersecting stereotypes in shaping when and how mental illness stigma is expressed.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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