

Pathways to Justice™: *Get the Facts*

MENTAL ILLNESS



A mental illness is a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning. Examples of serious mental illnesses include:

- Major depression
- Schizophrenia
- Bipolar disorder
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Panic disorder
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Borderline personality disorder

These medical conditions can affect persons of any age, race, religion, or income.¹

Facts

- One in four adults—approximately 61.5 million Americans—experiences mental illness in a given year.²
- A national study from 2002 through 2004 estimated that 56% of state prisoners, 45% of federal prisoners, and 64% of jail inmates had a mental illness.³
- 70% of people with mental illness are serving time for nonviolent offenses.⁴
- Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) trains police officers who want to educate themselves on properly intervening in a crisis with a person with mental illness.

Identification of Mental Health Crisis

People with mental illness are more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system compared to those without disabilities, and their disability is more likely to be identified by police and others in the criminal justice system when they are experiencing a mental health crisis. Some signs of a mental health crisis include:

- Hearing voices, seeing things that others do not see, or feeling that others are plotting against you
- Threats to harm self or others (this is not always present during a crisis)
- Talking to someone who is not there
- Poor personal hygiene, unusual behavior, disorganized thinking or speech
- Inappropriate expression of feelings, including hostility, indifference, or inability to express oneself⁵



National Center on Criminal
Justice & Disability NCCJD™

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Communication Tips

- Keep your voice calm and quiet
- Choose one officer to talk with the individual
- Introduce yourself and engage the person who is experiencing a delusion by asking questions or changing the subject
- Don't argue with people who are having hallucinations or delusions. Instead, reflect back the person's feelings ("I can see that you are really upset. Can I help with anything?")
- Keep a respectful distance when talking to a person in crisis and make good eye contact
- Consider "watchful waiting" if danger is not immediate⁶
- Do not make promises you cannot keep
- Ask yes or no questions
- Repeat yourself if necessary
- Know that hallucinations and delusions are very real to the person—be understanding

Individual Story

Keith Vidal of North Carolina was an 18 year old with schizophrenia whose mother called police to their home multiple times to help persuade him to seek additional help at a hospital. In one instance, two officers who had been there before and were familiar with the situation arrived; a third who was unfamiliar arrived later and shot Vidal. Vidal died as a result. The officer who shot him was indicted.⁷

Remember

- Mental illness alone does not increase the risk of violence⁸
- Helping an individual through a mental health crisis could save a life
- Mental illness is unrelated to intelligence level
- With proper support and treatment, most people with mental illness can experience recovery

Resources

National Alliance for Mental Illness

www.nami.org/template.cfm?section=legal_support

National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice

ncmhjj.com/about-us/overview/

SAMHSA's GAINS Center for Behavioral Health and Justice Transformation

gainscenter.samhsa.gov/

Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law

www.bazelon.org/

¹ http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness

² http://www.nami.org/factsheets/mentalillness_factsheet.pdf

³ James & Glaze. (2006). Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates. US Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report.

⁴ People with Serious Mental Illnesses in the Criminal Justice System. (2002). Fact Sheets for Advocates. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law.

⁵ http://www.mlive.com/health/index.ssf/2011/01/signs_of_a_mental_health_crisi.html

⁶ <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA09-4427/SMA09-4427.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/04/justice/north-carolina-slain-teen/>

⁸ <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/threat-management/201010/communicating-people-mental-illness-the-publics-guide>