

Santa Monica Daily Press

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Shedding light on mental illness

Editor:

In the wake of the recent tragedy in Arizona, people have been searching for reasons and answers. Inevitably we look for someone to blame. Some point at the tone of political discourse in our land, but many are looking at the mental state of the shooter and his treatment, or lack thereof.

At the time of this writing, we have not yet had an authoritative medical evaluation of the suspect, Jared Loughner. From what we know, he was almost certainly affected by some type of severe mental illness. Time will tell. Meanwhile, the national discussion is turning to what can we do to prevent people with mental illness from perpetrating more acts of violence.

For as long as I can remember, I lived with schizoaffective disorder. I feel it is time for someone like me to stand up for the cause that means so much to me: the treatment of people with severe mental illness.

I'm concerned that the horrific events in Tucson will rile the passions of many and lead to an increase in the level of fear, misinformation and stigma about mental illness. That's precisely what we don't need. Instead, we need more awareness and education about mental illness and better, more widely available treatment options. We also need to combat the stigma that stops many people experiencing symptoms of a mental illness from seeking the help they so badly need.

Severe mental illnesses are no one's fault. According to medical experts, a tiny percentage of people with mental illness commit violent acts, and when they do, it's usually against themselves. Of the even smaller percentage that perpetrates violence against others, most are affected by substance abuse. The risk that people who abuse alcohol or drugs will commit violent crime is about the same for those with mental illness as it is for those without.

Before being properly diagnosed and treated, I experienced many of the same psychotic symptoms that have been reported about Loughner.

For more than a decade, I was severely depressed, homeless, and cut off from others. Now I am a productive, active member of my community. I serve on the Board of Directors at Step Up on Second, a local mental health organization. I also run a learning center where people affected by the mental illness can take life-enriching courses and gain valuable new skills for the job market.

Many have said that not much can be done to help people living with mental illness. They feel the only treatment to be had is the doping of us to near-sleep. I know – at one time I felt this way. But it just isn't so. We already have many of the tools we need. Modern medicine has advanced so that like me, people who are down and out, homeless, and psychotic can recover.

But for this to happen, we need to make effective treatment options more available. Today's treatments for serious mental illnesses today can be highly effective. Studies have shown that 70 to 90 percent of those treated with a combination of pharmacological and psychosocial supports, have significant reduction of symptoms and improved quality of life.

Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, many state and county mental health and programs are being gutted across the nation. President Obama's healthcare program, which actually increases benefits for treatment of mental illness, is now in danger of being repealed.

I hope the tragic events in Arizona will provoke a national discussion about the importance of mental health benefits. And I pray that there will not be a backlash against those who have a mental illness. Let's listen to the better elements of our nature. We need to shed more light on the issues and find compassion in our hearts for those who suffer from mental illness.

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