

Is Mental Illness the Cause or the Result of Violence?

Research calls for us to know the difference.

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The recent horrific shootings in Philadelphia, Buffalo, and at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, perfectly illustrate some of the reasons that many children and their parents are experiencing troubling mental health issues. They're living in a very frightening world that feels out of control. We watch as Russia invades its neighbor Ukraine. Sars-Co-V-2 infects, kills, and mutates around the world. Wildfires spread as the globe heats. And for parents, who want to model the right response for their kids, the levels of fear and anxiety are also higher than ever recorded.

Earlier this Spring, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published a study in the American Medical Association's journal *JAMA Pediatrics* that reports significant increases in the number of children diagnosed with mental health conditions. The study, conducted by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), finds that between 2016 and 2020, the number of children ages 3-17 years diagnosed with anxiety grew by 29 percent and those with depression by 27 percent. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), adults and parents are experiencing anxiety as well.¹ In a mental health study we conducted early in the pandemic, we found that young people and women were the most profoundly affected.¹

Mental Illness Vs. Just Plain Violent

Our country pays a high price for each act of mass violence. Not only the immediate victims, survivors, their families and friends, but our communities, children, and families suffer. How do we explain the violence that the perpetrator inflicted? It has become popular to assert that mental illness is the cause. But is it?

The APA asserts that diagnosis alone cannot determine who may commit violence.² In fact, the vast majority of violent offenders are not mentally ill, as years of research have proven. According to research published by the APA, of all crimes committed by people with serious mental disorders, only 7.5 percent were directly related to symptoms of mental illness.³ Furthermore, in the study, there was no relationship between mental illness symptoms and the crime. Yet, we continue to associate mental illness and criminality, often with intense debate.⁴

In fact, more often than not, we are blaming the victims. We know that people with mental illness are actually more likely to be a victim of violent crime than a perpetrator of a crime.⁵ Many of the symptoms of psychiatric conditions are behaviors considered antisocial or criminal.⁶ As a result, we have the false perception of a causal relationship between psychiatric illness and criminality.

People naturally want to feel safer, and they have turned to owning guns themselves as a solution, attempting to calm their stress and anxiety over the increase in violence in the country. In a Stanford study of 26.3 million California residents published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM), among those who had acquired handguns, the risk of suicide by firearm was 7.8 times higher for men and 35 times higher for women compared with non-handgun owners.² Suicide rates by other means were not any higher among handgun owners. This study confirmed a previous case-control study also published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, that showed that in homes containing firearms, the odds of dying by suicide are three to five times greater than among non-gun owners.⁷

In a more recent study, the Stanford team addressed the question of whether possession of firearms at home provides protection against homicide.³ In this study of 17.6 million California residents, the researchers found that the rates of death by homicide were more than twice as high among those who lived in homes with guns, and the risk of being killed by a spouse or intimate partner was seven-fold higher; 84 percent of these victims were women. Thus, the presence of a firearm in the home provided risk, not protection.

This is especially important because one in three homes in the U.S. contain at least one firearm, and the evidence from ecological and case-controlled research suggests that gun access has the opposite effect. It is clear that gun violence is a cause of mental illness, not the product of it. Easy access to guns increases the risk of suicide, homicide, and serious injury. The threat of such tragedies and their occurrence causes substantial mental stress, and

prevention is always preferable. Direct and indirect exposure to such dangers has deleterious effects on our mental health.

How We Can Respond to the Stress of Violence in Our Society

Still, those who witness violence can be greatly affected by what they see, even on the evening news. All of us need, at the very least, remedies for our fear and anxiety, ones that really work. These solutions should involve a plan of daily mental health maintenance. Having a daily practice of de-compressing after watching the news or whenever one is stressed by societal troubles is paramount. It is wise to limit the daily amount of traumatic input from social and other media. Verbal and physical conflict is now a constant reality in our culture, with cult-like characters who shock us, almost daily. We must make sure we take good care of ourselves.

As a researcher and psychiatrist, I have spent my career talking about stress and the benefits of hypnosis and self-hypnosis to relieve stress. Because of years of close examination and study, we know that hypnosis, the oldest known therapy, helps with the stress and anxiety we've been experiencing. Think of hypnosis as a natural anesthesia for stress. Proven by years of science, it provides deep relaxation and the state of flow we need to reset our busy, worried brains. Like meditation practice, many people are capable of doing hypnosis on their own.

Other therapeutic tools that may help, when used regularly, are:

- Self-hypnosis via technology can be more convenient and private than a hypnosis session
- Calming music can create a hypnotic state as well
- Cognitive therapy or talking through what you feel
- Talking with a close friend you feel you can confide in
- Meaningful volunteer work

We need this reset because stress and anxiety have become all too common. You can set up a healthy, daily practice of reversing stress that is proven by science. Better yet, you want to have a household that is more stress and anxiety resistant for years to come.

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