

# 'You must be crazy!'

## (popular misconceptions about mental illness)

Attitudes to mental illness have varied significantly throughout history and across cultures. For instance, to this day, some preliterate societies (having no written language) believe that individuals who behave abnormally are gifted with supernatural healing powers and clairvoyance; that is, the ability to see into the future. In other words, the mentally ill are highly respected in some communities. In contrast to this, people suffering from mental illness in Europe in the Middle Ages (AD 500–1500) were accused of being possessed, that is to say, controlled, by demons or evil spirits. Attempts to expel these evil spirits involved cruel physical punishments, and isolating or imprisoning the 'possessed'. These traditional beliefs are probably responsible for the fear with which mental illness is approached. For, even in a modern scientific society, where the physiological causes of mental disorder are far better understood than in the past, prejudices and misconceptions about mental illness still persist.

One of the most common myths about mental illness is that it is an illusion; that it is 'all in the mind', depression being a case in point. Because depression is associated with tiredness and lack of motivation which are, to some degree, normal in everyday life, it is not always easy to distinguish between natural reactions to life's challenges and the symptoms of clinical depression, a mood disorder. As a result, people suffering from depression are often seen as 'weak', and are expected to exercise self-control to stop feeling depressed. Research has found, however, that depression is the result of chemical imbalances in the brain which affect mood, or emotional state, and is, therefore, a 'real' illness with physiological causes.

A second widespread myth about people who suffer from mental illness is that they are dangerous and violent. In reality, violence related to mental disturbance is usually only seen during rare episodes of severe psychosis, when an individual loses touch with reality. According to Pescosolido<sup>1</sup>, the most common causes of violence are alcohol and drug abuse, followed a long way behind by schizophrenia and depression.

Another misconception about people afflicted with mental illness is that they are out of touch with reality. It is true that some disorders, such as schizophrenia, may result in delusions – unreasonable beliefs, and hallucinations. However, the majority of people with mental illnesses, including depression, anxiety, phobias and bipolar disorder, are completely in touch with reality.

Schizophrenia is a widely misunderstood disorder which is characterized by the creation of an irrational internal world. The Greek roots of the word *schizo*, meaning *split*, and *phrene*, meaning *mind*, have led to the popular belief that schizophrenics suffer from split minds or dual personalities. As a result, schizophrenia is often confused with multiple personality disorder (another name for dissociative identity disorder), which is, in fact, the result of traumatic events, whereas schizophrenia is largely inherited.

It is interesting to ask how these popular myths are perpetuated in modern society. Asch's experiments in conformity<sup>2</sup> explain how the attitudes of individuals are influenced by group opinions. One example of this is the media, including film, which has a powerful influence on popular views and is often responsible for propagating negative stereotypes of those who are mentally ill.

Looking at films first, it is easy to find examples of melodramatic misrepresentations of mental illness. A film such as *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), which is based on the true story of Eve White's multiple personality disorder, dramatizes her illness. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) is another film in which the more alarming face of mental illness is represented. What is particularly powerful about this film, however, is the emphasis placed on the oppression and maltreatment of the patients by the medical staff at the psychiatric hospital.

The press is another field of the media which encourages the public to continue believing in stereotypes of mental disorders. Newspaper reports routinely link violent crime with mental illness, and more specifically, use terminology related to mental illness to reinforce negative images.

In conclusion, it can be seen that, in spite of advances in psychiatric diagnosis and treatment, mental illness is still widely misunderstood. Negative stereotypes, encouraged by the media, persist in modern society, and mentally ill people are commonly perceived as weak, dangerous, violent, delusional, criminal and frighteningly unpredictable.

### References:

<sup>1</sup> Pescosolido, B.A., Monahan, J., Link, B.G., et al. (1999). The public's view of the competence, dangerousness, and need for legal coercion of persons with mental health problems. *American Journal of Public Health*, 89, 1339–1345.

<sup>2</sup> Perrin, S. and Spencer, C.P. (1981). Independence or conformity in the Asch experiment as a reflection of cultural and situational factors. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 20(3), 205–210.