

People with Mental Health Issues: What You Need to Know Tip Sheet

Overview

More than likely, the library is already serving people with some type of mental illness. Approximately one in five adults and one in ten children has a condition that meets the criteria for mental illness. Mental illness can be episodic, recurrent, or persistent. It is usually invisible and can be successfully treated. By some accounts, treatment success rates for mental illness exceed those for heart disease and diabetes. Self-advocates, their families, and professionals agree that information about the condition is important for the management of mental illness. Librarians are uniquely placed to assist in the search for reliable information.

Society makes a lot of assumptions about people with mental illness. For example, there is a persistent stereotype that they are violent. However, research indicates that people with mental illness are no more or less violent than the general population, though they are more often the victims of violence. Too often people who we assume to have a mental health issue are discriminated against by the community. Within the library, they may be asked to leave because they are talking to themselves. Or they are perceived as security risks, especially when they are withdrawn, appear sad or confused, or are loud. As library staff, it is important that we remember to treat each patron and potential patron professionally.

Tips

- Treat people with mental health issues with the same respect and consideration as other patrons.
- Avoid making assumptions based on behavior. Remember that a patron is just as likely to be on the phone as talking to him- or herself.
- Remember that mental illness is not the same as unusual, deviant, or criminal behavior or a cognitive disability.
- Respect the privacy of a patron—have a discreet, but safe, place to talk if necessary.
- Allow enough time to meet the needs of patrons with orientation issues.
- Be aware of the wide range of behaviors associated with mental health issues. Help increase community awareness of mental illness with displays, programs, books, and other materials.
- Have sufficient signage to allow patrons to be independent.
- Select and recommend titles on health issues based on community needs and requests. Do not assume.
- Do not share your anecdotal stories to demonstrate that you understand; this may convey the wrong message. For example, do not mention “my aunt with the same thing.” Each situation is different; please respect that difference.
- Form partnerships with agencies, professionals, and self-advocates to assess and meet the needs of people with mental illness.
- Take care to correct negative stereotypes.
- Set and enforce standards of tolerance that reflect well on the library and serve as a model for the children and teens in your community.
- Reach out to group homes, state institutions, mental health clinics, and facilities.

This tip sheet, revised in 2020, is one in a series developed by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association.



Resources

[Mental Health America](#)

This consumer-oriented site, in both Spanish and English, covers topics from many points of views. Particularly helpful is information on dealing with side effects of medications and discussion about national policy issues.

[National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#)

This grassroots site, in both Spanish and English, includes information, advocacy, and discussion groups.

[National Institute of Mental Health](#)

The government mental health research wing, this site contains information about various conditions and treatments.

[Substance Abuse, Mental Health Administration](#)

This site provides information on a wide range of specific substance abuse and mental health issues.