#StopTheCrazyTalk aims to change words, attitudes

CU Boulder students create PSA to illuminate language that stigmatizes mental illness

By Clay Evans

Consider the following comments you wouldn’t be surprised to overhear in a coffee shop: “She’s so bipolar! One day she’s happy, and the next she’s completely depressed.” “Yeah, that guy is completely schizo, totally unpredictable.” “Man, I’m so OCD about what shoes to wear.”

Each one makes colloquial use of a word or shorthand phrase related to a mental-health diagnosis—bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder. All are not just imprecise and misleading, but also have the potential to stigmatize people with mental illness. “Why do we casually insult others with language that stigmatizes people with mental illness?” asks Meagan Taylor, a 2002 journalism graduate who is now studying integrative physiology at the University of Colorado Boulder. “We will never get rid of stigma unless we can change our underlying attitudes about mental illness and other people living in the same neighborhood. Taylor, who plans to become a physician’s assistant, said her work as a volunteer at a hospital and working in emergency services increased her compassion for people with mental illness. She hopes the PSA will be a small step to help change the way we use language.

The 2005 MacArthur Violence Risk Assessment Study at the University of Virginia, for example, controlled for substance use and other environmental factors and found no significant difference in the rates of violence among people with mental illness and other people living in the same neighborhood. Polis have found that 60 percent of Americans believe people with mental illness are “likely” to act violently toward others. While some studies have found a slight correlation between certain specific diagnoses and violence, more refined investigation has found that other factors, including substance abuse, childhood abuse and family history, are more important.

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“The mental-health community and their allies need to stand up for proper use of terminology, stop casual labels, and promote language empathy. If we want people with mental illness to be culturally integrated,” she says. “His immediate reaction was to say, ‘You aren’t going to come kill me in the middle of the night, are you?’”

Tossed out “mentally ill” any time someone does something harmful or anti-social is surprisingly common, says Solheim, and that can reinforce harmful stereotypes. Solheim recalls the time she sat down for an interview with a man who was renting a room in his house. After he told her he was an alcoholic, she decided to open up about her diagnosis. “I thought, ‘Wow, we’re admitting our foibles here,’ and said, ‘Well, I’m schizophrenic,’” she says. “His immediate reaction was to say, ‘You aren’t going to come kill me in the middle of the night, are you?’”

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