

# Opinion: Commonalities of gun violence and mental illness

By Ana Bourne

Like so many, I was saddened after seeing and reading about the latest incident of gun violence in America, which took place in Parkland, Fla., at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. The unforgettable images of children fleeing from the school, ambulance after ambulance arriving at the scene and frantic students and parents trying to grasp the gravity of what had just transpired were truly heartbreaking.

I am not alone in thinking that this is a time for our country to heal. This is not the time to politicize the Second Amendment, gun control or mental illness, nor is it the time for one side to demonize the other. Rather, it is the time to address these problems head-on.

I am going to leave the overplayed and overused expressions such as “guns don’t kill people, people kill people” and “all guns should be taken off the street” out of my discussion. Instead, I am simply going to address the issue of mental illness in our society, as so many have done in the past following these horrific tragedies. But perhaps, in its totality, there hasn’t been enough about this sometimes-crippling medical condition discussed in true and meaningful ways. Almost immediately after each tragic incident, whether they are in Newtown, Conn., Las Vegas or Parkland we find the issue of mental illness addressed on center stage in American society.

True enough, any discussion that can result in saving just one life from gun violence is a necessary one. But opening the difficult conversation about mental illness at such proportions only following an instance of violence is truly

disingenuous to the 1 in 5 adult Americans who suffer from mental illness each year. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration found that more than 18 percent of those living in the United States are affected by mental illness; 4 percent of those American adults experience "serious mental illness," which limits day-to-day activities such as going to work.

I find it truly disheartening, and it makes me downright angry when I see that there is such stigmatization of those suffering from mental illness in the U.S. And, this mischaracterization is only exacerbated by rhetoric from politicians and lobbyists who pounce on the opportunity to find a scapegoat and cloud the issues behind gun violence with a deep-rooted medical condition.

I truly believe that our country must allocate more resources; including time and money to help those with mental illness. It is not enough to just focus on understanding mental illness, we must build empathy for those with these conditions. Fortunately, I am currently in the planning stages of developing a nonprofit organization for this very reason— to help people in need of such understanding and empathy.

Studies show us time and again that those with mental illness are more likely to be victims of gun violence, especially to themselves, than to be the ones committing such acts against others. Having very tangible conversations about how to stop and mitigate gun violence is paramount. But at the same time, we must also put mental illness into perspective and realize that it too is a discussion we cannot ignore.

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