

Tip Sheet 7
Library Accessibility – What You Need to Know
Library Patrons with Mental Illness

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 Or they are perceived as security risks, especially when they are withdrawn, appear sad or confused or are loud.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 for Working with Patrons with Mental Illness

- Treat people with mental illness 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 herself.
- Remember that mental illness is not the same as unusual, deviant or criminal behavior or cognitive impairment.
- Respect the privacy of a patron – have a discreet, but safe, place to talk if necessary.
- Patiently allow enough time to meet the need of patrons with orientation issues.
- Be aware of the wide range of behaviors associated with mental illness.
- Help increase community awareness of mental illness with displays, programs, books and other material.
- Have sufficient signage to allow patrons to be independent
- Select and recommend title to people with mental illness based on community needs and requests. Do not assume.

- Do not share the story of you anecdotal stories to demonstrate that you understand, this may convey the wrong message. 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 you community.
- Reach out to group homes, state institutions, mental health clinics and facilities.

Resources:

English

This toolkit is adapted from Guidelines for Library Services for People with Mental Illnesses by the ASCLA Standards Review Subcommittee to Prepare Guidelines for Library Services for People with Mental Illnesses released in 2007. This comprehensive and outstanding document is available from ALA.

Mental Health America

www.nmha.org

This consumer oriented site covers information from many points of views. Particularly helpful is information on dealing with side effects on medications and discussion about national policy issues.

Mental Health, Mental Illness Information Center

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

The information on this site is more in depth information and includes summaries of current research.

National Institute of Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov

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

Spanish

Mental Health America

www.nmha.org

National alliance on Mental Illness

www.nami.org

This grass roots site includes information, advocacy and discussion groups.

